

## Ley Lines and Shadows by AabH

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Fantasy AU.

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According to Joyce, with the witch's death, the land turned bad. Fields of rich, black soil turned to sand and crumbled away until even the most experienced farmers struggled to make anything take root. The woods, once filled with game and birds, were eerily silent. It was as if all life fled when the witch drew their final breath. All of this 'used to be' was second hand knowledge to Will; he'd never seen it any other way.

He didn't mind the quiet or the difficult land. He'd never cared for chatter and concocting new methods to enrich his fields was a challenge, nothing more. Will tended his crops, mixed things like horse dung, egg shells, and rotting vegetation into the earth to help it thrive. He liked to whisper to his seedlings when no one could see and would happily traverse back and forth on Damora's back as many times as was needed to bring water to them when the sky refused to offer any. Every time Will set a seed to ground, he offered a prayer. Sometimes it felt like the earth heard him, that he could actually hear

it answer.

# 1. Chapter 1

Legends came and went. Fables and tales, warnings that elders told naughty children to keep them in line. It seemed to Will that telling fantastical stories was one of the only hobbies folks seemed to have in these parts. Unsubstantiated rumors and gossip traveled faster in the hamlet and its surrounding territories than leaves on wind, so it really should have been no surprise at all that whispers of a witch in the woods wouldn't be kept under wraps for long. No one seemed to know where the witch came from, nor how long they had been there. If you were to ask, it was as if a cloud settled over their minds and they just... forgot. No one could agree if it had been a week, a year, or a decade since the witch first arrived. All people knew was that the witch was powerful, and that they were blessed.

While the word 'witch' might have struck fear into the hearts of some, the witch of Viridity seemed to offer no harm. They healed the sick, helped birth the children, and rained blessings down on the townsfolk. The witch could craft gold from flax seeds, silver from fish scales, and some said that a simple laying on of hands could mend any hurt while a kiss blown from their palm would bless a field for years with bountiful harvests. Will couldn't say how true any of that was of course. The witch had been gone for most of his life and he was still a babe at his mother's breast when it had been driven away or killed (depending on who you asked). Will tended to think of it as killed because while the witch was gone, the cat remained.

Because even though the witch was gentle and benevolent, offering their gifts to whoever asked for them, *people* were cruel and selfish. This, above all things, is what convinced Will the witch was dead. How could one so kind, a witch of all things, leave behind their familiar? The fact that the cat remained, unchanged after nearly two dozen years, as if it was waiting for its master's return, was all the proof Will needed.

Things changed when the stories started. As the word spread of the blessings the witch brought to Viridity, men came. 'Witch Hunters'.

They didn't come to ask for blessings; they came to kill. They scoured the woods, beat down the doors of anyone they thought might be

harboring the witch. They threatened to burn it, the woods, the village, to the ground. They would raze everything in their path if it meant ridding the world of the abomination. Even under threat, no one would give up the witch. The hunters said it was because the town was cursed, under a powerful spell. The townsfolk said it was because they couldn't betray their protector, their guardian.

They hunted day and night until only the witch's familiar, the handsome black cat that roamed the woods appeared to the townsfolk. It would stroll through the village with little bundles of herbs and poultices around its neck to continue to deliver the blessings to the people, even when the witch couldn't. Folks appreciated the cat, fed it scraps and stroked its ears, but it was a poor substitute.

The witch locked themselves away in their hut and warded it with magics so strong no one could enter without invitation. The only ones who could find it at all had to have been there before. They weren't seen for weeks.

In desperation, on the night of the summer solstice, a child went to the woods. He was a son with no father and in fear of losing his mother in childbirth, sought the witch. The boy begged for help, for the witch to return to their midwife duties and keep his mother from dying, to keep the babe from perishing in his mother's belly.

The witch, moved by the child's pleas, came to the village. They carried the boy in their arms the entire walk; the head of their own funeral procession. The witch helped bring the boy's brother, a breach infant wrapped in his own umbilical cord, into the world beneath a strawberry moon on the longest day of the year. The babe was red, squalling, and thanks to the witch, alive. The mother was tired but no worse for wear, and the boy who'd begged for help kissed the witch's hands in thanks. This is how men found the witch. This act of kindness was the signature on their death warrant.

Elders said the witch was killed by the hunters that very night. They did not burn nor behead. The hunters were so enraged by the witch's ability to elude them for so long and by the villagers' refusal to help that this kill had become personal for them. Folks said the witch didn't even fight as they were dragged by the hair, hands around

their throat, and drowned in a pool just outside of town. Maybe the witch was too spent after assisting with the birth to fight. Maybe they had just had enough of the hounding and demands. The reason didn't matter. As the last breath left the witches lips, as the villagers watched and begged the hunters to reconsider, the water began to putrefy and turn dark.

Will didn't know how true that was either, but he'd never seen a pool of clear, sweet water near his town. There was only a bog where things went to die and the air was thick with rot.

According to Joyce, with the witch's death, the land turned bad. Fields of rich, black soil turned to sand and crumbled away until even the most experienced farmers struggled to make anything take root. The woods, once filled with game and birds, were eerily silent. It was as if all life fled when the witch drew their final breath. All of this 'used to be' was second hand knowledge to Will; he'd never seen it any other way. It didn't bother him. The village was peaceful now that most people had moved on to richer, less cursed lands.

He didn't mind the quiet or the difficult land. He'd never cared for chatter and concocting new methods to enrich his fields was a challenge, nothing more. Will tended his crops, mixed things like horse dung, egg shells, and rotting vegetation into the earth to help it thrive. He liked to whisper to his seedlings when no one could see and would happily traverse back and forth on Damora's back as many times as was needed to bring water to them when the sky refused to offer any. Every time Will set a seed to ground, he offered a prayer. Sometimes it felt like the earth heard him, that if he pressed an ear to it he could actually hear it answer. It was a silly fantasy so he never shared it.

So Will didn't hate the quiet, sleepiness of the place he'd grown up. He didn't have neighbors to speak of and he could ride into the woods alone to collect what he needed or couldn't grow on his own without fear of bandits and wolves. Will would stop on his way to and fro to leave a coin or two at the abandoned and overgrown hut where the witch had (apparently) once lived. His brother was the one who'd shown it to him, and now he found it as easily as his own home. Vegetation grew thick and wild here, and underneath the vines, you could still find the door. It was locked of course, and no

one had been able to get in to plunder it. Some magic must have lingered that still protected this place.

Will sometimes left the cat a saucer of cream or water, a gift for the silent guardian. Sometimes it was there, just out of reach. Around its neck, where it once carried bundles of healing herbs and tonics, was a key.

Everyone (or almost everyone) had tried to take the key at some point. Hell, it was a village tradition by now and almost a right of passage to try. Will never *really* tried though. The tradition was just that, tradition, and he would have stood out if he didn't participate. Everyone knew the door was locked for a reason. There had to be riches inside, treasures or blessings beyond your wildest dreams, and who wouldn't want that? All they had to do to break the protection spell was get the key.

Will thought (but never voiced his suspicions) that the cat almost enjoyed the attempts. It must be dreadfully bored after so long without purpose. Sometimes it would creep into town, sit on wall ledges, just out of reach. It seemed to like to watch the people, to groom itself and taunt the townsfolk below. When it was Will's turn to try, he could have sworn the cat was playing with him, like it was having *fun*. It even darted between his legs, right between his fingers as if it was daring him to try and hold on. Will remembered what the fur felt like; like every other cat he'd ever touched.

The most unusual thing Will could say for the cat was that it was intelligent and long lived, if not magical. Sometimes he thought it was just an elaborate prank, that some of the town elders got together to put the chain and key on the neck of whatever black cat they could find to keep the legend alive. He kept his thoughts to himself because even he realized, despite his skepticism about the authenticity of witch's familiars and magical keys, there had to be something special about the cat that kept it from being caught and exposed as a hoax.

Will thought it was stupid, but it did entice tourists. Even after two decades, the story was enough to bring in the odd traveler who wanted to try their luck at catching the cat (and spending their coin) while in town.

The cat, for its part, was nimble, quick, and far more clever than the travelers its reputation brought. It was too fleet footed to be caught by hands and too witty for traps. Will made good coin by selling 'information' and rolls to the travelers who came and went, and it was amusing to watch the cat almost play along, just out of reach until its pursuers tired out and cut their losses. So, while he wasn't rich by any stretch, Will did well enough for himself and he supposed he had the cat to thank for at least some of his good fortune.

So Will left his coins and saucers of cream at the abandoned hut and gave his little bows to the cat when he saw it. The cat paid no mind to him. It just watched from atop the thatched roof, its golden eyes unblinking.

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Will jerked awake to a sound he didn't immediately recognize. It took his groggy mind a moment to even register what it was and when he did, Will fell off his bed in his panic. That was gun fire. He fell to his knees in an attempt to get low to the floor and away from any windows. Who the hells was firing a rifle this time of night, in this part of the hamlet? Will's little plot of land wasn't near enough to woods for someone to be hunting and even if they were, it's not like there were any deer or elk in these parts anyway.

Will reached under his cot, searched blindly for his own weapon as he heard his horse, Damora, neighing and crying out in fear (or pain). Had someone shot his fucking horse?

The noise that had woken him in fear rang out again and this time, Will felt angry instead of scared. He closed his hand around the barrel of his rifle and pulled it out from under the cot. He quickly checked to make sure it was loaded and started edging towards the door, still crouched and near to the floor. Outside, he heard another shot and Damora neighed again. Will cracked the door open with the muzzle of his gun and looked out. He saw a shape moving in the dark and Will stepped onto his stoop to take aim.

"Hargrove! What the hell do you think you're doing shooting at my house?" he shouted, voice hoarse and shaky.

The blond paused his movements, redirected his eyes to where Will stood in his small clothes, gun in hand, and grinned.

“Wasn’t shooting at you, Byers. I’m looking to skin myself a cat.”

“What, rat pelt not good enough for you anymore?” Will snapped, rifle still raised. “Besides, I don’t own a cat for you to get your rocks off by shooting.”

Billy laughed, his own gun hanging loose in his hands as he looked Will over.

“You’re funny, baker boy. No, I’m not looking for any old tabby or barn cat. Gonna get myself a real special one. Been chasing down the prettiest black beast,” he smiled. “Chased it right through here. You haven’t seen it, have you?”

Will licked his lips and looked at the gun in Billy’s hands. He didn’t care for the implications of what he’d said and Will shifted again. His hands were still shaking and he was starting to feel chilled from the cool night air around his shift. He felt ridiculous, barefoot and nearly naked on his door stoop, gun raised at what equated to little more than a school yard bully. The fact that Billy was running around in the dark, apparently trying to shoot the village mascot left a sour taste in his mouth, so Will pushed away his embarrassment for the time being.

“You’re trying to kill it? Why?” Will asked, alarmed.

He’d never believed *all* the superstitions and the stories, but he knew that cat was special in some way. Everyone tried to catch it at some point or another, but *killing* it... after what people said happened when the witch was killed? Even if it wasn’t a crime to kill the cat, it certainly felt like it. Almost like a sin. If nothing else, that was just asking for bad karma.

“Damn thing slipped from my snare. Seems easier to just shoot it at this point,” Billy said carelessly, as if he had no given no thought at all as to what killing the animal might mean.

Will lowered his head to the sights of his rifle and took aim.



“Get off of my property, Hargrove.”

“Relax, Byers. I’m not going to shoot you by mistake. Can’t imagine your pelt would look nearly as good hanging above my fire.”

That was not a reassuring statement. Will had never liked Hargrove and his implication that it wouldn’t be an accident if he shot Will did nothing to improve Will’s opinion of him. Will held the rifle as steady as he could.

“You’re firing recklessly, in the dark, at my home. Get off my property.”

The blond laughed.

“Or what? You gonna shoot me, baker boy?”

Will kept his eye focused down the sight.

“Are you willing to find out?”

Hargrove looked at him, considering, and Will prayed his bluff wouldn’t be called. He could shoot if he had to, had brought down a squirrel or hare when he needed to, but he’d never aimed at another person. He didn’t want to pull the trigger, no matter how much he disliked Billy. Damora neighed again and Will narrowed his eyes. Will wouldn’t put it past the other man to fire blind at the barn in his attempt to kill a cat (probably just a housecat at that, nothing more). Will adjusted his stance and fired.

Billy jerked back, ducked, and started laughing as he realized just how close the shot had come to striking him. Will reloaded.

“I’m not going to ask again,” Will warned, hands still shaking.

“Alright alright, calm down. No need to do something stupid,” Billy said with another harsh laugh.

*Stupid? Like what you’re doing, running around in the dark firing off at shadows?*

Will motioned with the muzzle of his gun towards the town.

“Get out of here.”

Will was fairly certain he could get another shot off before Billy raised his weapon. Billy must have thought the same because he took a step back.

“Okay, I’m going. You’ll let me know if you see that cat.”

It didn’t sound like a question, more like a threat.

“I’m not telling you shit, Hargrove, except that if you come around here again you won’t be getting a warning shot,” Will growled as his teeth chattered.

Will kept his gun raised and pointed until the other man was well out of sight. Then and only then did he let his arms fall to his sides and his knees give out. Will balanced himself against the doorframe for a moment while he collected himself. He couldn’t control his body, he couldn’t stop the shaking or his chattering teeth. He closed his eyes and pressed his hands to his face and waited for his body to settle. Will waited, for how long he didn’t know, but eventually the adrenaline passed and he was able to control his breathing. Once he could, Will dragged himself up and started jogging barefooted towards his little barn.

In her stall, Damora stamped her long grey legs and threw her head side to side in agitation. Will reached out to stroke her snout and whisper to her while he opened the door to the stall and stepped in.

“You’re alright girl, I’m here. Did he hurt you?” Will asked as he looked the mare over. She appeared to be spooked more than anything. Her stall was dusty from her stamping feet and there was a dent in the door from where she kicked it, but Damora didn’t look injured. Will pressed his face to hers while he stroked her nose. “You’re okay, pretty girl. He’s gone now.”

Damora huffed and butted her head against his as if she didn’t quite believe him. Will patted her neck and ran his fingers through her ash grey mane to help calm her. She stomped again and knickered, shoved against him while Will planted his feet.

“What’s wrong? Something else?”

Damora let out of a puff from her nose and Will glanced down to see what she was looking at. Blood. There was blood in the straw. Will stepped back and picked up his rifle. Damora might not have been hurt by Billy’s midnight rampage, but something had been.

He slipped out and shut the stall door behind him so the dappled mare couldn’t bolt if something spooked her again. Will shifted as he crept forward, eyes locked on the floor to follow the trail of blood without stepping in it. It wasn’t a drop or two; there was a lot. It led to the tack room, the door slightly ajar. Will took a breath and nudged it fully open with the muzzle of his gun and paused to look around.

There in the corner, under all the bits and bridles, something was hiding. Will stepped in and shut the door, trapping himself and whatever it was that was hiding in the room. A raccoon? A possum? Whatever it was, it was badly wounded. If it was bad enough, the kindest thing to do would be to put it down and end it’s suffering. Will edged closer and a pair of yellow eyes reflected back at him, accompanied by a growl.

“Alright, easy now. I just need to get a look at you,” he whispered as he took another step, gun half raised.

The thing hissed and spat as he approached and Will hesitated.

*Oh, it is a cat.*

Fucking Hargrove. He’d said he was trying to kill the witch’s familiar and he’d probably shot someone’s pet. Joyce had kept cats when Will was growing up and they’d always liked Will. Maybe he could catch it, see to it and patch it up. Will scooted closer, set the gun down, and reached for a dusty old saddle blanket.

“Hey there friend, it’s okay. I know you’re hurt,” he soothed and stepped closer. “Don’t be scared.”

The cat growled again and Will crouched to try and make himself smaller, less threatening.

“Come on now. Pspspspspsp,” he encouraged and took another step.

The cat hissed and lashed out, struck him across the exposed leg that his small clothes did nothing to protect. Will winced, looked at the blood welling near his knee, and frowned.

“Okay... “ he sighed. “If that’s how you want to be...”

He gripped the saddle blanket tighter and crept closer as the cat growled another warning in his direction. Will launched forward, threw the blanket over the injured feline, trapped it between his arms securely as he scooped it up. The blanket erupted into fits of yowling and Will struggled to keep a firm hold on the injured animal as it lashed out with teeth and claws. The thick blanket might as well have been a linen sheet with the way that cat managed to slash and bite at him through it. Will fell to his knees, knocked off balance by how the animal threw itself back and forth in his grasp. He held on, bit his lip while he searched for a way to contain the creature and his eyes landed on an empty feedbag. He looked away from it. Judging by the ferocity at which the animal struggled, it could shred the burlap and break free in seconds. Will’s eyes fell on a saddlebag. It was sturdier, but smaller.

Will scooted on his knees across the dirty floor, undignified as it was, and reached for the bag one handed. As quickly as he could, he shoved the cat and the blanket in. Not quick enough to avoid the cat’s teeth which sunk into the back of his hand and tore a painful wound across his tendons. Will shouted and nearly dropped the damnable thing as he saw the fat of his hand exposed. He grit his teeth.

“Calm down you mange riddled bastard, I’m trying to help you!”

Maybe he should have shot it, ended it’s misery. It would certainly have been a less painful endeavor than trying to catch it.

Will carefully balanced the bag in his arms, protected now from teeth and claws, and carried it as quickly as he could through the barn. Damora knickered at him and he smiled at her, triumphant.

“I caught it, don’t worry. It’s okay,” he assured her even as the bag

gave another ferocious yowl.

Getting into the house wasn't much of a struggle since he'd left the door open in his panic to check on Damora. He pushed the door closed with one shoulder and the bag in his hand lurched, like it could tell it had been brought indoors. Will set it down, gently as he could, and took a step back. The bag moved again, fell onto its side, but the cat couldn't free itself. Will walked past it to retrieve his work gloves from a chest. They were thick leather, meant to protect his hands from developing sores while he and Damora tended the fields, but if the cat wanted to fight, they would do.

Will winced as he pulled one of the gloves over his bleeding and now swelling hand. It hurt, *a lot*, but he'd see to it later. Right now, he had to see how badly Hargrove had injured the (extremely angry) animal trapped in Will's home. From his chest, Will extracted his heavy stone mortar and pestle, grabbed a handful of yarrow, goldenrod, and calendula. He knew he had honey somewhere, but it was probably in the kitchen. Will set the items aside and turned to face the bag. It was strangely still.

He approached it, suddenly very apprehensive. Had the cat died in the struggle? Could its heart not take the stress of the situation on top of its wounds? Will gently nudged the bag with his foot.

It was empty.

What the hells? Will knelt and picked up the bag to turn it over and examine. The bag had been broken, split down the seams as if the threads holding it together had been cut with a knife. Will frowned and looked around. His windows and door were sealed, the cat had to be somewhere in the cottage. He almost didn't see the blood stains against the dark wood of his floor, but managed to find them eventually.

Well, found was a polite way to say stepped directly in. He cursed, looked at the floor and the splotches of blood. He'd clean it later. For now, Will had to figure out where the animal had hidden before it lost too much blood and he'd have to find a corpse. He followed the blood to a room near the back of his home, where he stored his food. He sat on his knees and peered under his icebox. The cat growled low

and spat at him.

“Alright you bag of bones, I don’t want to have to do this, but you’ve squeezed yourself under there so I have to drag you out. Sorry about this,” he grumbled as he got onto his stomach and pressed his cheek against the hard floor.

A pair of angry yellow eyes met Will’s and the battle ensued. There were plenty of snarls, yowls, teeth and claws from the cat, as well as cursing and shouting from Will. The cat, once hunched and approximately half dead, sprung to life and caught him sharply across the face, bloodying Will as he managed to scruff it. It was exhausting and by the end, they were both bleeding, furious messes.

“Gods take you, you hateful thing,” Will gasped after striking his head against the icebox as he tried to shimmy backwards on his belly. The cat didn’t take kindly to that and wriggled to free itself while Will dragged it and himself out of the confined space.

Will pulled the feline out and into the light, held it at arms distance and reached for a work towel to wrap it in. Holding it by the scruff gave him more control over it but the fight clearly wasn’t over. He had to get the animal under control to examine so he wrapped it tightly in the cloth until only it’s huge black head was visible. He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction while the cat narrowed its yellow eyes and growled like a very angry bread loaf.

“There now. Might as well calm yourself, struggling isn’t going to help either of us,” Will pointed out as he carried it like a swaddled infant to his kitchen.

He flipped the hissing thing over, examining it until he found where blood was seeping through the cloth, near the animal’s haunches. Will peeled the cloth away a layer at a time until he exposed matted, bloody fur. He touched it with gloved hands, searching for the wound.

“Well, it looks like he got you pretty good, doesn’t it? Don’t worry, It’s only your leg. Don’t think I need to dig anything out of you, thank the gods. Looks like it went clean through. You’re a lucky fellow, you know that?” he asked as he glanced at the cat who

answered with a snarl. “Still have to clean and bind it though.”

Where could he put the cat while he boiled water and ground the herbs? The chest would surely secure it, but it was cruel. The pantry was the smallest space with the least amount of places to hide, but if the cat went berserk it would wreak a good deal of havok and damage his supplies, his grain stores. Will looked at the bundle in his lap and held it up.

“Listen here. I have to get things ready, things to *help* you. So please, try not to destroy anything.”

The cat blinked at him, eyes dilated.

“I am going to take that as an ‘alright, I understand’,” Will said with a sigh.

He carried the cat to the pantry, set it down carefully and slipped out as quickly as he could. He shut the door behind him and listened for a moment to determine whether or not the cat was destroying anything. It didn’t sound like it. Will moved away to start his preparations. He boiled water, gathered as many clean(ish) rags as he could, and started to work pounding the herbs and mixing them with honey to make a paste.

He tried to remember what his mother had taught him while he worked. Will wasn’t a healer like Joyce, but she’d given him enough instruction to be able to provide himself aid if he needed it. After all, he couldn’t go crying to his mother whenever he injured himself or she’d never get a moment away from him. So Will tried to remember as best as he could the correct dosages, the techniques needed to press and squeeze the juice from leaves and roots. Some things felt fuzzy, like he was remembering something from a dream. He didn’t remember picking up goldenseal but it felt... right. He’d only ever used it to treat stomach pains but if he’d picked it up with the rest, it must have been for a reason, even if he couldn’t name it. It had to be something Joyce had said, but he couldn’t recall the words.

It took him maybe an hour to prepare everything to his satisfaction, and by the time he was done, Will could see the first trickles of sun trying to creep over the earth. Will looked it all over and picked up

another towel. He carried it towards the pantry and knocked. It felt a little foolish to knock and announce himself, but Will didn't want to scare the cat by just... opening the door.

He pushed it open and did a quick scan of the room to survey the damage, but nothing seemed amiss. The cat hadn't fled into a dark corner and tried to bolt for the door when he knocked. It wasn't even hiding at all. In fact, the cat was laid out on a sack of flour, licking its hind leg while it watched Will step in. Will approached, cautiously, ready for the animal to bolt, but it didn't. Will lifted the towel, unsure.

"Have you settled down? Not going to shred me, are you?"

Unsurprisingly, the cat didn't offer a response.

"Okay well, just in case..." Will draped the towel over the cat and scooped it up again.

It was far easier this time. Maybe the feline had finally worn itself out. Maybe it had gone into shock. Either way, it let Will pick it up without protest and allowed him to carry it to the kitchen. When he set the much calmer animal on the table, it flopped onto its side, almost presenting the wound like it knew what Will wanted. Will looked at it, astounded.

"Well... thank you. Please don't attack me again," he added while he pulled the glove off his injured hand so he had more mastery of it for the delicate work ahead.

He'd stopped bleeding, but the wound beneath the glove was an ugly one. The cat watched Will dip a rag into the freshly boiled water and hover it over the cat's black fur. The wound on the animal's leg was more visible now that the cat had cleaned itself up. Will hesitated before he wiped the cloth gently over the exposed flesh, fully expecting the cat to lash out or dart away. When it didn't, Will continued, a little more confidently. By the time Will set the rag aside and dipped his fingers in the poultice to apply it to the wound, the cat was resting its sleek head between its massive paws, eyes half closed.



The cat twitched its tail and wrinkled its nose when Will's herb and honey coated fingers passed its face. Will huffed indignantly.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is it not up to your standards?" he asked the feline.

It swished its tail but didn't offer a response.

Will gently touched the cat, applied the mixture directly to the wound and waited for it to attack him. Amazingly, it lay still and let him work. Once the wound was fully coated in the sticky salve, Will pressed a square of cloth against it and began wrapping the cat's leg. The cat didn't pull away and Will was half tempted to scratch it beneath the chin in praise but ultimately thought better of it; too close to the teeth.

"Well, there you go now. Don't rip off the bandage, understand? You leave it alone and don't lick at it."

The cat stared at him and Will sighed.

"I suppose you're hungry then too, right? Need something in your belly after the ordeal you went through," he muttered as he began to clean his own wounds. "I don't suppose you like bread do you? I don't have much else..."

He really didn't have much else. Oats and hay for Damora, a bit of butter and lard, and shelves of bread. Meat was a luxury, one he couldn't often afford, and Will didn't really care to hunt. He did fish from time to time but he wasn't a great angler by any stretch of the imagination. Will finished cleaning his hand and considered his options while the cat seemed to have fallen to sleep right on the kitchen table. It must have been dreadfully tired after all it had gone through. Will certainly was.

Will stood, put his supplies away, and settled for crumbling up some stale bread he usually saved for the birds, cracked an egg overtop, and mixed it all together with a dab of lard. Will set the bowl next to the cat who opened its eyes sleepily and sniffed the offered food before sneezing.

"Oh well, my apologies," Will scoffed. "One would think a little

gratitude would be in order you know,” he said as he held up his wounded hand for the cat to see. “I’ve been more than a gracious host. You can stay until your leg’s healed and then you need to get back to whoever is missing you,” he finished as he filled a saucer with water to place next to the meager meal he’d prepared the animal.

Will would have liked to go back to sleep, but the day was starting and he couldn’t laze about all day the way the cat seemed intent to do. Will glanced at it but it was already back to grooming itself. When it began to lick its chest, Will saw a glint of silver beneath the fur. A collar? There was no way Billy had actually managed to shoot *the cat*; this had to be someone’s lost pet. Will blinked and reached out to get a better look at the item but the cat spat at him. Will pulled his hand away without giving the object proper examination.

“Fine then, be that way,” Will said as he moved away to strip, scrub himself clean, and prepare for the day. “Eat what you want. If the food isn’t good enough for you, there’s a mouse who keeps chewing a hole in my wall, just there,” Will indicated with a wave of his hand. “Doesn’t matter how many times I patch it, little bastard chews through it again and again. If you catch it, feel free to eat it. Otherwise, I have things to attend to,” he announced to the cat who blinked lazily at him. “If you’re still here when I get back, I’ll have to see to that collar of yours like it or not. Handsome thing like you must have *someone* looking for you.”

The cat didn’t answer. It simply laid its head between its paws again, obscuring any view Will had of what rested around its neck.

## 2. Chapter 2

“There was a youth, a cruel youth, who lived beside the sea. Six little maidens he drowned there by the lonely willow tree. As he walked o’er with Sally Brown, as he walked o’er with she, an evil thought came to him there, by the lonely willow tree,” Will sang and Damora knickered. Will laughed and stroked her flank. “What? Not your style? Too dour?”

He glanced over at the cat who lounged nearby, soaking up a ray of sun as it rolled in the dirt.

“And what about you? Do you have an opinion on the matter? I suppose you’d rather have jaunty tune instead of something so sinister? Perhaps a bawdy sailor’s song?”

The cat trilled and rose to its feet to yawn, as if it thought that was a fine idea. Will chuckled and went back to work on Damora’s hoof.

“Well, you’re out of luck. I am a good, gods fearing man. I know no such songs,” he said with as much piety as he could muster.

Will watched the cat from the corner of his eye for a reaction, saw the little hint of silver as it stretched. It hadn’t taken him long to realize it was no collar, but was in fact a chain and key that dangled from the cat’s slender neck.

He’d been horrified at first. Not only had Billy actually shot the fabled cat, Will had trapped it, shoved it into a sack, declared it a mange riddled flea bag, and locked it in his house with no way out.

Of course, as soon as he realized what he’d done, Will opened his door to let the animal out and offered his apologies. The cat had looked at the open door, looked at Will, and trotted out without incident. Will was relieved; maybe he hadn’t offended the creature and he could return to normal life. No great catastrophe had befallen him (not even the bite had gotten infected), so he couldn’t have botched the handling of the situation too poorly.

Will watched the cat leave, said a prayer of thanks, and tried to

forget it ever happened. He manned his stall, sold his goods, and returned home in the evening to begin baking for the next day. A soft sound, a scratching at his door drew his attention as he settled in for the night and Will felt his stomach drop like a stone. Will opened it and stared down in trepidation at the cat who sat patiently, mouse in it's mouth and waited for him to invite it in. When no such invitation came, the cat deposited the little corpse near the door, as if it knew Will wouldn't appreciate having such a thing in his home, and waltzed inside to curl next to the oven while the sweet rolls baked. Will, stunned into silence and not knowing what else to do, shut the door and continued his nightly routine while the cat dozed.

Will never tried to retrieve the key from the chain nor force the cat from his home. On the off chance this *was* the fabled cat of legend and not some elaborate prank, perpetrated by the townsfolk in an attempt to make him finally lose his mind, Will didn't think it would be in his best interest to upset an entity that *may* or *may not* be watching.

The cat itself didn't behave as anything more than a regular house cat, so the idea of a prank wasn't terribly far fetched. It sought warm places to lay and was just as vocally demanding as any barn cat when it was time to be fed. Even if it was somewhat entitled, having decided without invitation that Will was its caretaker now, it was a perfectly ordinary thing.

Well, that wasn't quite true. It did seem more intelligent than any housecat Will had encountered, but it wasn't as though it scribbled notes in the dirt to him or anything supernatural. The strangest thing about it was how it always watched him with a serious expression, like there were thoughts in its head beyond where its next meal would come from and finding a queen in season. Will hadn't wanted a cat, another mouth to feed, but the thing had attached itself to him as a shadow. It would be rude to kick it out, maybe even heretical if it actually was a familiar.

Damora jerked free from Will's grasp and stopped her hoof as the cat walked directly between her legs to rub against the stool Will sat upon, as if it had heard his thoughts about its intelligence and was determined to prove him wrong. Will huffed and looked down at the feline. He pointed the hoof *pic* at it accusatory and nudged the cat

away with his foot.

“Listen here, are you *trying* to get trampled? What good is patching you up if you’re just going to get yourself stomped to death not more than a month later?” he asked, tscking at it. “I thought you were meant to be clever?”

The cat chirped at him indignantly as Will coaxed Damora’s hoof up again to continue cleaning it.

“Well aren’t you? Witch’s familiar and all. You’re healed up now, shouldn’t you be off chasing after spirits to keep them at bay? Or taking part in some dark, blood magic ritual? Or at least ridding the barn of mice?” Will asked as the cat licked its paw. “What good are you, exactly? Such a nuisance,” he finished with a grin.

The cat looked at him again, blinked, and trotted away as if his words offended it. Will returned to his work, unworried. The cat came and went as it pleased now, but always showed up in time for supper and a scratch behind the ears. Will couldn’t say he minded, though he didn’t really understand why a creature like this, who had apparently maintained independence for twenty some odd years, had decided that *Will* of all people was worthy of its company.

Still, he didn’t mind said company and the cat gave him no reason to complain (though he did so in jest regardless). It didn’t mess his house and any rodent or unlucky bird it killed was left outside rather than dragged through the cottage. It was an affectionate thing too, despite the serious look it wore on its pointed face. Sometimes Will would hold it on his lap and play with his great, oversized paws. Will liked to press against the soft pink pads, force out the massive claws, run the tips of his fingers over them and coo ‘who’s the most fearsome hunter in the land?’

The cat would look back, unimpressed.

‘You know,’ he’d say as he stroked it’s belly. ‘I have a theory that you’re always so serious because you were meant to be this great, powerful thing and you’re packed into this neat ten pound package. I think it vexes you immensely that I can just scoop you up and,’ Will continued as the cat curled around his hand to bite and kick at it

without breaking skin. 'Do this whenever I like,' he finished by detaching his hand to pick the cat up and kiss it on top of the head.

Will released Damora's hoof and stood to stretch. Otherworldly creature or regular tom, the cat would be back when the day was done. Will picked up the curry comb and hoof pic, deposited them in his tack room, and returned with what he needed to saddle Damora. As he worked, Will began singing again.

"There shall I visit the place of my birth and they'll give me a welcome the warmest on earth. All so loving and kind full of music and mirth, in the sweet sounding language of home."

This time, Damora puffed gently, apparently approving of his new song choice.

\*\*

When Will lay his head down at night to sleep, sometimes he found it hard to come by. He'd dream of the strangest things. Sometimes he woke with the smells of flowers and earth still clinging to his nostrils. The dreams were worse near the Hunter's Moon; worse and so much better. During the Hunter's Moon, the summer solstice, the dreams were nothing less than tactile. He felt the moss between his toes, the water on his lips. Will dreamed of home he'd never see and a place he'd never been. He dreamed of sweet sounds and gentle breezes. Will dreamed of a man with a deep, soothing voice, and of flowers taking root in his lungs and blooming from his mouth. Will dreamed of peat growing over his skin, over his bones. He dreamed of little crawling things with claws and teeth that pulled him along by the hems of his pants, leading him to places unknown. He dreamed of warmth and belonging and when he woke, he wept.

Will tried to sleep, but tossed about. The solstice was a month away yet but the dreams had already begun. He couldn't settle his mind, nor his racing heart. He felt sometimes that there was a drum there, trapped in his mind and pounding away the closer the solstice came. The Hunter's Moon used to be a time for celebration, for miracles. It was when the witch was at its most powerful, when they could commune most easily with the other planes of existence. Some said that's how the witch had escaped execution; that it had slipped away

to the Feywild. That time was gone.

All the Hunter's Moon was now a time for fear, the anniversary of the witch's death and Will's birth. Instead of celebrations, people locked their doors and turned out their lights. Some left offerings, prayers that whatever evil lurked those nights would pass them over. As far as Will could tell, it always worked. At the very least, no children ever went missing, never to be seen again.

Some people said the residual magic, the vestige of what was left broke free those nights. If it touched you, it could strike you dead. Some said the witch walked again on this night, furious at its unjust death and the refusal of the town to help. Well, that's what people whispered anyway. Will had never seen any evidence of such things although his mother once had a chicken go missing one summer solstice. It was probably foxes.

Some said they could hear wailing and voices from inside the abandoned hut that night. A piteous, frightful howling of grief and anger. Will didn't know if it was true, but he didn't care to find out. He wasn't foolish enough to wander deep into the woods to see for himself if there was truth to the rumors or not. It was bad enough that his unusual dreams came more frequently around those days, he didn't need to get spirited away by some long dead ghost.

Will flopped over, rolled onto his back and the cat that had curled behind his knees gave a chirp of protest. Will reached down, stroked it down the back.

"Sorry," he murmured. "I'm having trouble sleeping."

The cat rose, crawled onto Will's chest and settled back in, a comforting weight.

"You know," Will said as he pet the cat. "If you keep hanging around here I'm going to have to start calling you something other than 'cat'."

The cat looked at him and started to purr. It dug its paws against him, kneading at his chest like it was making bread. Its claws caught against his shift, pulling at it and Will tapped the paws with his

fingers. He was terrible at sewing, he wouldn't be able to repair it if the cat shredded the material.

"What about Jet?"

The cat bit his finger lightly.

"No? Raven? Midnight? Onyx?" he asked as he withdrew his hand to play with the cat's tail. He ran the tip across the cat's nose, teasing it before holding the tail to his own top lip as a furry mustache. "Ash? Cinders? Ink? Ser Abelard the Third?"

He released the tail and the cat rolled onto its back, presenting its belly as it headbutted Will's fingers before biting them again. Will pet it, briefly touched the chain and key before letting his hand drop away.

"If we can't agree, I can always keep calling you 'fleabag'," Will pointed out. "Your pickiness is only going to end up hurting you in the end," he sighed sleepily.

Something about the cat's weight, the gentle rumble of its purr was soothing. Will felt his eyes start to grow heavy as the animal went back to kneading at him.

### ***Sleep. Rest.***

"I know. I need to sleep or I'll miss the sun..." Will agreed tiredly. "Maybe I should get a rooster and hens. Would you like fresh egg with your meals? I've heard it does wonders for animals' coats...." Will murmured before blinking, confused. "You didn't... you didn't just speak did you?" he asked slowly as he eyed the cat in the dark. It simply looked at him, its own eyes half closed as it purred. "Of course you didn't..." he assured himself. "I must be more tired than I thought."

Because cats couldn't *talk*. That was a ridiculous thought to even have. What he'd heard was nothing more than his own sleep deprived mind, his imagination. It was no different than when Will would pretend to hear the wind sing or seedling answer him when he told them stories and whispered his prayers. Cats couldn't talk any more



than Will could press his hands to the ground and feel the roots and worms moving below. It was a fantasy and childish one at that. Will touched the cat's ears, then down its neck. He thumbed at the chain for a moment before dropping it.

"You know, if you *can* talk..." he whispered, sleepily. "You could tell me. I'd not reveal your secrets. Half the town thinks I'm touched as it is. You know Billy? The one who shot you? Of course you remember him," Will trailed off and closed his eyes. "When we were kids, Billy swore up and down that I was a changeling. Threw me in the river when I was four to see if I'd float. I sunk like a stone. Jonathan had to drag me out. Hargrove's father whipped him good for that stunt. Think that's why he's never really liked me."

The cat purred, but didn't say anything. Will sighed and threw an arm over his face.

"Since I doubt either one of us cares much for drowning, I wouldn't tell anyone. If you could talk..."

The cat remained silent except for the low rumble in its chest. Will peeked out from under his arm to look at it. Its pretty yellow eyes were closed, like it was already asleep. Will nodded in agreement and tried to settle his mind.

"Maybe you'll tell me your name in a dream. Since you don't want to say it aloud," he said quietly, as the first tendrils of sleep pulled at the edges of his mind.

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Will's dreams didn't always regulate themselves to sleep; sometimes they invaded even his waking hours. They were never as powerful as when he slept, but after describing them to Joyce as a boy and her concerned looks that followed, he'd become aware that they were more than normal daydreams, so he kept them to himself. It wouldn't do to tell anyone he could hear voices when no one else could, that he could find a fairy circle in the most mundane of places. What good would it do to say he could tell by the way a plant *felt* whether or not the roots ran deep or if it needed water? It wouldn't help or improve anything to mention his daydreams, so he kept them to himself.

Such was the case when he rode astride Damora while she pulled his cart of goods. Will waved at people he passed on the road and pretended he couldn't hear the whispers from the woods, voices that tickled his ears and drew his gaze. When he was alone, Will watched the tree line for a long time, curious, but nothing revealed itself to him from the foliage. It wasn't like he had *expected* anything to happen, as nothing ever did, but it felt disrespectful to pass by and carry on as though he hadn't heard them at all.

He waited as long as he thought was polite and tried to make out the words. He could never seem to understand them, no matter how hard he tried. It was like they were spoken through a fog, or in some long dead dialect he'd never heard. He couldn't understand it, but it was pretty.

The daydreams were less vivid when he manned his stall, when he was further away from the forest. When he was here, in the center of town, he was reduced to mind numbing boredom and people watching. Viridity wasn't large nor much of a tourist attraction outside of what the cat drew. Aside from the people who heard the tales and the odd traveler that passed by on the way to grander things, Will knew most everyone by name. It was exciting to get a chance to watch the travelers, the way they walked and their manner or dress. They were all so exotic, so different, and all hungry or in need of provisions. Will watched two strangers, two new faces as they walked, a welcome curiosity.

"Good morning!" he called in greeting. "Something for your travels? Or a bite to fill you now?"

The men approached and Will smiled brightly. The strangers were clad in handsome, well made leathers with what looked like hand stitched embroidering. Neither of them returned his smile, but one bent to examine his goods while the other looked him over. Will kept his smile firmly in place. If there was one thing he knew, it was that a friendly merchant sold more than a sour one. He let his eyes drift over the men while he held his smile. One had tattoos that were only half hidden by gloves; the other had visible scarring on their face that looked like he'd been kissed by lightning. Both were of an age with him, though their manner seemed much older.

“What do you have?” the man with the scars, the shorter of the two asked. He looked like he was more intent at examining Will than he was with the actual product offered.

“Rolls, loaves, biscuits and the like,” Will said quickly and stepped back to make room for the men to see. “Made fresh daily.”

The man murmured something non committal and pointed at an oddly colored loaf.

“What’s that? Why’s it that unnatural shade?”

“Nothing unnatural about it, Ser,” Will said as he scooped up the object in question. “It’s just sweet potato bread. The purple is from the yam. I traded two sacks of flour to a traveler from the east for the tubers that grew it. Now I grow my own,” he explained as he cut off a slice and held it up for the man to taste.

The traveler didn’t seem interested. Will wasn’t discouraged though, not many people wanted to try purple bread. Will set it aside and waited for the man or his companion to speak again.

“Grew it, did you? In this region? We heard the land here was difficult to cultivate,” The taller of the two said as he stood.

Will brightened, always eager to discuss farming techniques.

“It can be, but I’ve found that if you leave things like dead vegetation and manure to decompose, it mixes well with the soil and helps the crops thrive. Eggshells too,” he said excitedly.

“How did you come by this knowledge?” the tall one asked as his companion shifted his eyes over the rest of the stock.

“Trial and error,” Will said, thinking better of saying ‘well, I dreamed it’.

The shorter man nodded, accepting the answer and indicated another of Will’s goods. This time, the man pointed to a roll with flecks of black.

“And that?”

“Honey rolls, Ser.”

“Why is it flecked like that?”

Will blinked and looked at the rolls in question. He smiled brightly but didn’t offer one in case it was rejected like the sweet potato bread had been. Will liked his own baking but not enough to ruin more handing out unwanted samples and have to eat piece after piece by himself.

“It’s just chamomile and lavender,” he explained with a half smile. He was proud of his creations and liked to show them off. They were usually a hit with travelers who were tired of the hardtack that most were left with after a long time on the road.

“Why?” the man asked, unexcited.

Will hesitated. He was used to people asking questions; the oddities he sold always drew attention and coin from the local children who dared each other to taste them. He just wasn’t used to how gruffly the man asked about his items. Maybe he was from a larger hamlet, a city even, where niceties and politeness weren’t considered virtues. Will cleared his throat and put the rolls away.

“Well, um, the scent of lavender is calming and chamomile can help settle an uneasy mind. I thought these would do well as a treat for little ones before bed.”

The man nodded, eyes still on Will. The stranger’s companion stood and shifted, set a hand on his hip and Will’s eyes followed the movement. The stranger’s hand rested on his belt, near the hilt of a short sword. Will looked back up.

“Sers, is there something in particular you’re looking for?”

“So this is to soothe and bring on sleep then, is it? What if I needed to be alert? Have energy?” the second stranger, the one with his hand on the sword hilt asked.

Will chewed his lip and looked at them both a little more closely. The leathers they wore were fine indeed, and studded. Armor. Both of them were wearing armor. Will looked at the embroidering, closer

this time. They looked like runes. Will couldn't read them (as far as he knew, no one in this region could) but something buzzed and hummed in the back of his mind, muted. He chuckled nervously but both were still looking at him so he shifted his weight.

"I'm afraid I'm not an apothecary friends, but I suppose roseroot and holy basil would help with-"

"-And sadness?"

"Are you feeling sad? Maybe a trip to the Blue Rose for a drink would help with that," Will joked. Neither man looked amused so he quieted himself and cleared his throat again. "Saint Jon's wort, I suppose. Can't imagine it'd taste good baked into a bun though."

The men exchanged looks and Will felt suddenly very uneasy. He moved a step back, smile still firmly in place as the men looked at him critically.

"Is there... anything I can help you with? Will you need rations for the road or...?"

"We're staying. A few days at least," the taller of the pair said. "Business."

"We'll take three of these," the shorter one said, motioning to the honey rolls.

Will hurried to wrap the sticky items as neatly but as quickly as he could. With shaking hands, he laid them on the counter of his stall, suddenly very eager for these men to be on their way. These weren't the kind of travelers Will liked to watch and share gossip with; these men made him feel uncomfortable in a way he couldn't name. There was no outright hostility, no threats, but they felt dangerous. It wasn't just the runes, or the scars, or swords. Most people carried weapons of some kind to protect themselves with, (even Will owned a rifle) and had scars to show. It was all of it combined. Will took a step back and put his hands in the pockets of his apron.

"It's nine copper," he said quietly as he thumbed the stone in his pocket. It was a pretty thing, one he'd found by the mire outside of

town when he was a boy. He'd picked it up absentmindedly and kept it ever since. He liked to rub it from time to time, so much so that the thing was worn smooth around the edges.

The taller man reached towards the hilt of his sword and Will's breath hitched. The gloved hand passed the weapon and pulled loose a coin purse. He extracted a silver wyvern and dropped it on the counter. Will squirmed, dropped the smooth stone and pulled out his own purse to dig for change.

"Keep it," the shorter man said as he picked up the parcels.

"Thank you, Ser. Is there anything else I can assist you with?" Will asked, still hesitant to pick up the coin.

"Not right now. If we need something else, we'll be back."

Will didn't really know what to make of that. It sounded an awful lot like they might be back for more than provisions, but what? Will didn't have much else to offer, he doubted the men bartered in rumors and wives tales. He couldn't imagine what the pair might return for if it wasn't what Will had already offered them.

"Sers, you said you'd be staying for a while. May I ask what you're doing in Viridity?" he asked as the two turned to move away.

"We're hunters."

Will almost laughed but stopped himself before he did. There was nothing worth hunting in these woods. There were no prized boar or legendary white wolves to be had. There were barely deer and elk. The biggest, most impressive thing Will had ever brought down on his own was a bighorn ewe and it had been pure dumb luck. Will picked up the coin and pocketed it uneasily. He replaced his smile, which had faltered from the unusual interaction, and offered a wave of farewell.

"I hope you catch whatever you're looking for."

There was a pause, then the taller one looked at Will again.

"We will. We always do."

“What do you make of those men?” Will asked the cat days later. “I don’t think I care for them myself. Very strange folk. Someone said they were witch hunters so...” Will glanced down at the animal that padded in the grass next to him as he rode. “It’d probably be best if you kept your head low for the time being.”

The cat, Merle (‘my little black bird’), Will had decided on calling him, flicked an ear but didn’t seem concerned. Will sighed, looked ahead where the trail ended where he’d have to navigate on his own. He wasn’t worried about finding the place (he could find it blindfolded if he needed to), but he didn’t feel confident bringing Damora off trail where she could tangle in the roots and injure herself. He dismounted, led her a little way into the trees to hitch her. Merle rubbed against his legs as Will pulled loose a sack to sling over his shoulder.

“C’m on. Let’s get a move on before we lose the light,” Will said as he looked at the animal.

They had hours yet, the sun hung around so long this time of year. The walk wasn’t terribly far, but what Will searched for was sometimes difficult to find. He started walking, not bothering to look if the cat followed. It always did. So Will tried to enjoy the walk and the smell of the woods around him as he strolled. He was alone here (or as alone as could be expected), so he let his mind wander while he walked. After a time, he paused, looked around, and pursed his lips.

“I know they’re out here somewhere...”

He wandered back and forth, looked at every tree, at every root, and huffed in annoyance. The cat gazed at him inquisitively, but offered no advice. Will finally sat, placed his hands on the ground, and glanced at the feline.

“You could help, you know.”

***What are you looking for?***

“Sheepshead mushrooms. They’re supposed to be around oak trees, but maybe it’s too early in the season for them...” Will sighed, nonplused by the imaginary voice he’d assigned the cat. He was used to it by now and as silly as it was, it was comforting to have someone (even himself) to talk to. “I wanted to get an early start on gathering them this year, but I may have been overzealous.”

The cat twitched its ear again, quite suddenly, and slunk away. Will let it go. Maybe it would come back if it found something.

“Try not to get lost,” he called, teasingly and laughed to himself as his head rolled back against his shoulders to face the sky.

“Who are you talking to?”

Will jumped, sat up straight and looked behind him to where the voice had come from. It was the men, the hunters. Will scrambled to his feet while the shorter of the two stepped closer.

“No one, Ser. Just myself.”

“Talk to yourself a lot, do you?” the taller one asked, hanging back.

Will laughed and brushed his clammy hands against his thighs.

“A fair amount. No, not a fair amount, not a lot I mean. Just um, you know. The usual amount.”

“The usual amount is not at all.”

Will hesitated, smile frozen in place. That was fair enough. Will shifted his weight from foot to foot as the taller man walked around in a semicircle, like he was considering trapping Will between the two of them. The shorter one edged closer but Will stood still, as relaxed as he could make himself.

“What are you doing out here?” Will asked, trying to be as friendly as possible.

“Just having a look around,” the taller, tattooed man said as he walked. “And yourself?”



“Hunting, like you. Well, mushroom hunting,” Will replied with a shrug. “So, somewhat less glamorous and exciting.”

“Why?”

Will shrugged again and felt his eyes dart towards his shoulder as the taller man made his way behind him.

“Just collecting ingredients.”

“What kind?”

“Sheepshead mushrooms. Hen of the woods if you're more familiar with that name,” Will said as he turned a little to try and keep an eye on both.

“For what purpose?” The shorter man asked, arms crossed over his chest.

“General wellness, nothing more. Taste isn't bad either, if you're interested,” Will offered. “Do well sautéed or in a stew.”

“I thought you weren't an apothecary,” the tall, tattooed man said curtly.

“I'm not,” Will replied, a little nervous.

“Are you a witch then, boy?”

Will couldn't stop the laugh this time; it was too shocking of a question. The men didn't laugh and Will started picking at his nails.

“Me? No. Just a baker. We haven't had a witch around here in... in nearly-”

“-Twenty three years. Yes, so we've heard.”

“Forgive me for asking but...” Will tried to edge backward but stopped before he bumped into the taller of the pair. “If you know that, why are you here?”

The shorter man shrugged, mimicking Will's earlier movement. He

took a step closer to Will who looked down, uncomfortable. He heard that muted buzzing in his head again and resisted batting it away. It wouldn't have looked anything but incriminating to suddenly start swatting at unseen bees.

"Just investigating. We heard there was a hut out here somewhere. Can't seem to find it though. We keep walking in circles. Maybe you've seen it?"

"Why would I have seen it?"

"You live near here, don't you? Near the woods? You must have passed it during your time... mushroom hunting."

Will stood frozen, the buzzing felt more like a drum. They knew where he lived? Why? Will glanced up, met the scarred man gaze before dropping it again. Should he lie? If he did, would they know?

"Ser... there's nothing there. Nothing to see but rot and a half collapsed building. If there was a witch that way, someone would have seen it by now."

The man examined him quietly for a moment before taking a step back. Will released the breath he was holding and the drumming buzz eased up a little. He shuffled his feet, resisted the urge to move away and run.

"So you know where it is," the scarred man said and motioned to his companion. "You'll take us there."

It wasn't a question.

"Sers, I can't... my horse. I left her hitched by the road," Will tried, looking for any excuse while he scanned the underbrush for signs of the cat.

"She's secured, isn't she? No wolves or thieves in these parts, are there? She'll be safe enough."

"Can I take you another day? The light is fading and it's not, well, the Hunter's moon, you see. It's only days away," Will whispered, the buzzing so loud he almost couldn't hear himself speak. "It's not safe."

Evil spirits roam that place. The witch..."

"Thought there hadn't been a witch in two decades," the tall one said as he lay a hand on Will's shoulder, making the smaller man jump. Will looked behind him to meet cold eyes.

"There isn't. There hasn't been," Will said again, legs shaky. "It's just... folks here, we don't go there this time of year. It's bad luck."

"Why?"

"Sers, I'll happily take you once the moon has passed. Please, there's nothing there," he tried again, throat a little tight, head light.

"Then you should have no problem leading the way, yes? Since there's nothing there to fear," the tall one said and pushed against Will's shoulder, nearly toppling him.

Will swallowed hard and searched for an excuse to dig in his heels and refuse to move. He knew it was a bad idea. The men, the witch hunters, weren't threatening him, not exactly. That being said, they'd already seen him talking to (the cat) himself and asked enough questions that he felt refusing this small request would put him on their radar if he wasn't there already.

*Are you a witch then, boy?*

Will wasn't, that was ridiculous. He forced a smile and bent to pick up his forgotten sack while the other men watched him. He threw it over his shoulder and offered another nervous smile. He ducked his head in a shallow bow and motioned with a hand.

"Right this way," Will chirped, voice blessedly steady.

"Oh no. After you. We'll follow."

Will didn't like it, but didn't argue. If they pair had planned on drawing their blades and running him through, surely they would have done it by now. They'd found him nearly a mile from the road, as isolated as he could be. It must be a habit, learned from their trade to always keep themselves at someone's back so they couldn't be surprised. Will walked and tried not to think about how if he moved

strangely, if he was too erratic he might end up with a sword through the gullet. He hadn't seen them unseathed but only imagined they were sharp enough to slice through him like butter. He walked as steadily as he could, kept an eye out for the hut but... he felt strangely disoriented. It was like he was walking through a mist and couldn't see more than a few feet ahead in any direction. He didn't know how long he walked with the hunters following. The sun kept changing its position and time felt confused. Was time passing at all? How long had he been out here?

Will paused to orient himself and the scarred hunter approached.

"What are you doing? We've passed this bend in the river already."

"I... I don't..." Will trailed off and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ser. I don't know what's wrong. I can't...It should be right around here," Will tried to explain.

"Are you bewitched, boy? Something addling your mind? Or are you just playing a game?"

"No games, I swear," he whispered as his eyes darted to the blade on the man's hip. "It's here, somewhere. I don't know why I can't find it."

"Calm, Troy. It's as it was for us. Walking in circles until we gave up and turned away. We found our way back to the road only after we stopped looking for the place," the taller one said with a shake of the head. "There's magic here, protecting the place. That much is clear." The man rolled his head on his neck, cracked it, and looked from his companion to Will.

"Boy, you said there was something going on. A hunter's moon. What did you mean?"

Will shifted his gaze from the men to the sky. He held his hand above his eyes, blocking them from the sun's rays as he looked.

"The solstice. It's in a few days."

"What of it?"

“People say the witch lives again on that day. Maybe we can’t approach until after,” Will offered, though he didn’t know how true that was. The time of year had never really mattered before. Will had never had trouble finding the place regardless of what time of year he tried. He didn’t know why he couldn’t find it now but was grateful the hunters didn’t seem to be holding him responsible.

“If the witch lives but one day a year, I say that’s the perfect time to find it,” the shorter man, Troy, pointed out.

“Shall we keep searching?”

“No, not today. We’ve kept our guide long enough. If something is protecting this place from all but the locals, we’ll have to take the time to figure a way around it,” Troy said as he glanced at Will. “We’ll escort you back.”

Will didn’t argue. It wouldn’t do any good to protest that he could find his way back, not when he’d spent the better part of an afternoon leading them all in circles. Will went quietly with them, one man on each side, and tried not to listen to the buzzing in his head.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm trying to get my final manuscript put together for class and y'all, I am NOT having a good time. I'm so excited for winter break I can't even tell you. I hope I have all the time I need during break to get some chapters in various works out as well as get some reading done. I hope you liked this chapter, I know it's a little slower paced than a lot of my works, but I kind of just needed something like this to help me relax between all my assignments and the more difficult scenes in other stories.

As always, comments and kudos are appreciated. Be well and take care of yourselves.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Summary for the Chapter:

As Will's birthday and the Hunter's moon approaches, his dreams become more vivid.

#### Notes for the Chapter:

CW: Very brief romantic contact, very brief allusions to homophobia.

Will didn't like confrontation, he never had. He liked to think that his agreeable nature is what kept him out of trouble, even when he was causing trouble as a child. It was hard to be angry at a boy who accidentally tore down your laundry from the line when that same boy came back the next day with a basket full of flowers as apology, and lye soap to clean the mess he'd made. Will might not have many close friends, but he counted almost no one as an enemy.

It was a great relief when the hunters took him back to the road with no further conflict or questions. That wasn't to say it was a comfortable walk, because it decidedly wasn't, but at least he didn't feel like they were considering running him through anymore. Maybe they never had been considering it in the first place, and it had all in his head, part of his overactive imagination. Either way, Will was grateful that the conversation quieted on the walk back. He wasn't sure how many questions he could stumble his way through after the one about whether or not *he* possessed supernatural powers, as his preference was, well, *none*. After they found him sitting alone in the woods, apparently talking to himself and gathering questionable herbs, he counted himself lucky the questions were as few as there were.

Will would have liked to wait, to hang around a while to see if the cat would show back up, but with people watching it would have seemed strange. After all, he'd been the one making a fuss about wanting to hurry back before dark. The hunters didn't seem to be in much of a hurry themselves; the taller one was too busy looking at tracks in the dirt and making notes. Will hopped onto Damora's back

and rode away, his sack empty and his heart pounding. Two days later and with no sign of the feline, Will started to worry.

He stood outside, the evening before his birthday, bowl of food in hand, clicking his tongue to draw the cat's attention and watched the treeline for signs of movement. When he saw none, he set the bowl down and crossed his arms to listen. He wasn't listening for movement of animals or the songs of birds. The humming buzz, the whispers from the woods were unusually quiet now that the cat was gone and he strained himself to hear it. He hadn't realized how much clearer he heard those things with the cat hot on his heels, winding between his ankles as it meowed incessantly for attention. Not until the animal was gone. It was still there, the noise, but it was faint, as if there was too much wax buildup in his ears. Will even scrubbed them clean, hoping it would help, but it hadn't. Things were too quiet, too still. Will hated it.

He closed his eyes and stretched his toes, tried to let his bare feet settle into the ground as he listened. The earth felt warm and dry, comforting, and he started walking. He wasn't going anywhere in particular, just let his feet take him where they wanted across the property. He walked the edge of the treeline, ran his hands over the bark of the tree where he'd hung his suite feeders, reminding himself to replace them soon. Will moved away, walked to the little fenced in paddock he'd built the year the filly had come to live with him. She'd been a sickly thing that wouldn't latch and was eventually rejected by the mare. No one thought she'd live the year, so she'd been given to him willingly, without charge. He used to bring inside, feed her cows milk and water from a repurposed sheep's bladder and wrap her in blankets to keep her warm while he massaged peppermint oil into her boney, thin frame. As Damora got older, he mixed in oats and flax seeds to her diet to help her grow. And grow she did. The foal that no one thought would make it more than a few weeks grew into a beautiful, strong, and well mannered animal that attracted attention from travelers and townsfolk alike. A few tried to buy her, or at least breed her and purchase the offspring, but Will always declined. He didn't want to sell or exploit her; Damora was his friend. Will watched her kicking up grass as she pranced around and tossed her head, and thought on how he'd have to expand her pen so she could run more freely.

He ended up at his herb garden, near the basil patch where the cat sometimes liked sleep, but it wasn't there. There weren't even any fresh paw prints.

He'd gone back to the clearing the next day, hoping to find Merle. He walked and called for the cat, in case it got just as lost as he'd been the previous day when he wandered in so many circles. After a while, Will had to admit to himself that a creature such as a familiar, which presumably wandered and knew the woods like the back of its paw, hadn't gotten lost. It simply chose not to return to him.

Will didn't know what he'd done to upset it, or why it hurt his feelings as much as it did that the cat had decided to leave him. It had only been with him a short time, just a month or so. He didn't have reason to be so attached. Hells, Will had been sure to let it know just how much of a pest and nuisance it was to him at every opportunity; always under his feet and parading around like it had been born in his home. He'd always said it in jest, but maybe that's what had finally driven the cat away. He'd been ungrateful to have been visited by it, and disrespectful. Maybe he never should have tried to name it, to force some kind of *ownership* onto it.

The solid weight against his chest at night and the deep rumble of its purr, which echoed and harmonized with the whispers of the woods, had helped him sleep. The last two nights had been terribly lonely, and unusually cold for midsummer. Will missed the little, living heating pad that curled behind his legs or under his chin. He kept reaching out to stroke the cat's fur, or fiddle with the chain, but touched only air.

Will felt his nose prick with disappointment and he sat down among the herbs to center himself. The thought of the cat having left on its own accord, though it hurt, was less painful than the alternative; that it had been caught or killed. He would have heard news of that, wouldn't he? Will had manned his stall as usual, but hadn't seen hide nor hair of the hunters since their fruitless excursion through the glade. It would have relieved him under other circumstances, but now it weighed heavily on him. He'd left before the hunters did. Had they set traps while he was gone? What reason would they have to? No one knew the cat had taken up residence with him, did they? It's not like it followed him into town and hung around his stall. He



didn't get many visitors, so there was no one around to see him at night feeding and speaking to it. So it had to be that the cat left on its own, didn't it? Wouldn't the hunters have paraded through town, declaring their success, or opened the old, locked hut if they'd killed it? He heard no news and took solace in that at least.

Will sat on the warm ground and breathed in the smells, eyes closed.

He let his mind wander as he leaned back to flop down among the plants. Joyce, one of his rare visitors, had been by that morning. While Will didn't like many people, but his mother's warm smile and gentle embrace were always welcome. Jonathan had left home years ago, but Joyce had a letter from him and a parcel of seeds wrapped in wax paper as a gift for Will's birthday celebration when she came. Joyce always brought Will's mail with her; no post was ever delivered this far out of town.

'Will, my sweet boy, why don't you visit me more?' she asked, heavily laying on the guilt, as she was prone to do.

'I'm sorry, Mama. I've been busy,' he'd offered as an excuse and looked at his feet. Even though he knew it was affectionate manipulation, it cut him like a blade every time.

Joyce cupped his face, her hands warm and eyes soft as she looked him over.

'You look good.'

'You too, Mama.'

Joyce really did look as lovely and healthy as she ever had. Her dark waves had strands of silver, but Will thought they made her look dignified rather than aged. Even the wrinkles she carried around her eyes were from smiling and she always seemed to glow, like she'd swallowed a little ray of sunlight.

'When are you going to settle down and marry?' she asked, launching into a long held grievance of hers. Ever since Will had come of age, it was 'courting this' and 'marriage that'. Will struggled not to roll his eyes disrespectfully as she continued, fully aware he was tired of this

conversation before it even began. 'You're old enough to have children by now,' she scolded, back to the guilt.

Will blushed at the question and following remark. He looked away again, at a field mouse that was suddenly very interesting to him.

*Gods, she wants **children** from me now?*

'Girls find me parculair, Mama,' he tried, hoping the excuse would stick.

It wasn't a lie; *most* people thought he was unusual, it had to apply to the women in town as well. He didn't bother to mention the fact that none of the women in the village kept his interest or roused any feelings of desire beyond the odd twitch or two. That wasn't to say that they weren't lovely, because they were. He appreciated women, with their sweet voices and clever charm. It was just that the soft, smallness of their hands, the plush curves of their bodies, and the mystery of what lay between their legs held no interest for him. He couldn't imagine marrying one, crawling into bed with her and fathering children. He was so embarrassed by the thought he felt there was a very real chance he'd die from it.

'I want grandchildren, you know,' Joyce had chided him, making him blush harder.

'Jonathan has sons,' he quickly pointed out, hoping to divert her from the subject.

Will's mother had rolled her eyes and huffed, clearly unsatisfied with the response.

'Two boys I see every three years or so. They grow faster than weeds, I've missed all their milestones. I want a baby in my arms again. I want little ones clinging to my skirts and begging for sweets. Honestly Will, you act like it's a death sentence to marry.'

Will shrugged and watched the mouse as it groomed its whiskers with tiny paws.

'You could remarry and have another baby if you're so desperate for one,' he'd suggested helpfully. 'You still have your monthlies, don't

you?’

Joyce slapped his arm with the letter from his brother and blushed just as red as he did.

‘Bite your tongue. A baby at my age...? No, absolutely not. I’m past my child raising years. I don’t want to raise children, I just want to spoil them. Besides, who do you propose I trick into marrying me and fathering my children?’ she’d asked incredulously.

‘Hopper likes you well enough. Newby as well,’ Will had pointed out, hoping it would put an end to the uncomfortable conversation.

It worked well enough as Joyce blushed harder and swatted him again before letting the talk of marriage and children die. Will had offered her warm mulled wine and a small meal back at his home while they chatted about lighter subjects; his crops, his coming birthday, and whether or not Will would ever purchase the rights to set up a permanent structure in town to open a proper shop. By late afternoon, both were red with drink instead of embarrassment, and Joyce kissed him twice, once on each cheek, before departing.

‘You’re going to stay indoors tonight, aren’t you? Not going to be out at the Blue Rose or anything?’

Will blinked at her, confused. He wasn’t prone to drinking (that afternoon aside), and anyone who knew him knew he was a homebody.

‘Of course not. Why?’

‘It’s just... these men in town. They’ll be out patrolling tonight. Roped in a group of foolhardy boys to join them. You know how drink makes people act. I don’t want you to get hurt.’

‘Why would I be hurt?’ Will chuckled. ‘Even if I did go out drinking, I’ve no interest in witch hunting nor chasing a ghost through the night. It’s not like I’d go out and drink to excess and end up in a brawl.’

Joyce gripped his sleeve, brows drawn. The serious look on her face was usually reserved for very serious, unpleasant conversations. Will

grit his teeth in anticipation and looked more fully at her, the laugh still half falling from his mouth.

‘I’m serious, William. Stay inside, don’t go into town. I know it’s the day before your birth and you might want to celebrate, but I’m asking you not to.’

Will pulled back, less amused and more nervous now. Joyce didn’t let her fingers slip from his tunic; she held him firm as her knuckles turned white.

‘I’m not going anywhere, Mama. What’s wrong?’

‘Don’t go out into the wood either. I know how you like to wander.’

‘Mom,’ he said more seriously. ‘I’m not going to do anything tonight. I was going to groom Damora and try to sleep early. Why? What’s going on?’

Joyce finally let him go, but she wrung her hands together in a nervous, unsettling way.

‘They’ve been asking about you.’

‘What?’ Will asked with a tense laugh. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. They spoke to me very little as I shut down the questions quickly. But Mrs. Halloway came by to see me and said they’d been asking her things and that your name came up. Tonight isn’t the night for you to be wandering about stargazing. Not with those men and their group prowling around chasing spirits.’

Will hesitated as his stomach flopped within him like a fish. He smiled brightly, as though nothing was wrong, and took a step away.

‘I won’t wander. I promise.’

Joyce seemed satisfied with that because she let her hands go limp before gathering her skirts and nodding.

‘I’ll come by tomorrow. You can make me gooseberry pie. Since you’re so desperate to have people begging you for sweets,’ he told

her, teasingly to brighten the dark look on her face.

Joyce smiled, though she still looked a little worried.

Will remembered that look as he lay in his garden and tried to sober up. Will usually loved Joyce's visits, but this one left a sour taste in his mouth. She hadn't made a fuss about him wandering the woods in nearly fifteen years, not since he was a boy. Joyce knew Will could manage to find his way back, and it was very rarely any worse for the wear. He understood her concern, with strangers whose entire job was hunting and killing witches asking questions about *him*, but why would *he* of all people have attracted their attention?

He was quiet; he kept to himself and didn't cause any problems. Maybe he was a little strange, but he didn't practice any dark arts of commune with evil spirits. He never practiced blood magic, or *any* kind of magic, thank you kindly. He didn't like to kill things and tended to cry when he had to bring down an animal to keep himself fed. He always apologized and offered a prayer for the animal, and he was sure not to waste any of it. He couldn't imagine spilling blood for the fun or ritual of it. Even the vermin the cat brought to him got little burials and flowers laid out for them. There was a reason he'd never killed the mouse that kept chewing through his wall, though he didn't fault the cat for doing so. It was a cat after all. Even if it wasn't, Will knew very few people who were squeamish about killing vermin. Another peculiarity about him.

He stretched out and ran his hands across the leaves of basil and sighed. He'd never heard about the witch of Viridity sacrificing anyone; those tales were usually about hags and their ilk. Will was never really sure why the hunters had killed it in the first place if it didn't do anything wrong. Maybe they just killed anyone who was too different, regardless of the danger they may pose.

When he was small, still in his short pants even, Will used to hope that the witch had only been driven away instead of killed, and that it might come back eventually. He used to wander the woods, exploring the hollows of trees and thickets of growth. He used to dig in the dirt; would widen fox and rabbit tunnels and try to squeeze his way in, as if he'd find a great, underground lair with trolls and fairies and hobgoblins all hidden right under his feet. Will would listen to

the hum and whispers while he searched, certain that if he could just make out the words, he'd be led in the right direction. He never found anything other than his good luck stone.

Eventually, Will had to admit to himself that the witch probably was dead, and was never going to reappear in a spectacular display of magic and miracles. Will thought it was sad, that he would very much like to meet a person like that, and now he'd never have an opportunity.

Will pinched the leaves of the basil between his fingers and sighed. He didn't need the basil right now. With a great dramatic sigh, Will pushed himself up and stood to head towards the edge of the garden and search for the mugwort. He didn't care for the taste of it, but he liked to squeeze the leaves and mix them with oil to dab over his eyelids at night from time to time. He couldn't be sure, but it seemed to amplify his dreams. Since it was so close to the solstice, he'd probably have a vivid, entertaining night's sleep in celebration of his birth rather than a night out. Once he collected the leaves and stabled Damora for the night, Will spread a little salt over his doorstep to keep evil away before settling in to sleep.

He didn't remember where he learned to do these things with the oils and salts and herbs; only that he always had and it always seemed to work well enough. Will crawled into his bed and propped the window open in hopes that a cool breeze would find its way to him in the night. Maybe the cat would see the open window and consider it an invitation to return. Maybe he'd wake in the morning to an annoyed, expectant chirp, and little claws digging into his shirt to get his attention. Maybe he'd even get a bite on the nose or chin if the cat was hungry enough from its time away from him and the meals he provided. Will doubted it, but there was no harm in hoping.

He lay on his side and watched the sun complete its long journey across the sky, chasing after the moon, a lover it couldn't ever seem to catch. A few times over the years, the sun and moon touched and blacked out part of the sky, as if their fingers brushed for only a moment before they parted again. Will had only seen the moon and the sun touch a handful of times, saw how it made others recoil or say a prayer, but it only made his heart sing with joy for them. Will watched the sun set as raucous laughter of what sounded like

drunken men made its way to his ears. He vaguely wondered how many of his peers had joined the hunters in their endeavor as he rolled onto his back in annoyance.

Idiots, the lot of them. The most they could hope to find in the woods would be a broken ankle from tripping over a root in their inebriated state.

Will rolled his eyes and chewed on his valerian root to help settle his mind. He didn't care if people had their fun, but his mother's worried face left him feeling troubled. Will closed his eyes, listened to the faint laughter, and hoped he wouldn't wake until the sun did.

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In the dream, Will was buried deep in the dry earth. There was no light, no movement, and he was afraid. Usually when he dreamed like this, when he was engulfed in the dirt and the land, it was warm and wet and full of life. Will could feel the movement of the insects, the roots of plants wrapped around him and squeezed as kindly as the arms of his heart's true love.

Will had never had a lover. He'd had bashful fumbblings with the butcher's daughter for a few weeks when he was a youth and still trying to figure out what was wrong with him. He had dreams, fantasies he had no control over, but the touch of another person was almost totally unknown to him. Maybe that's why he dreamed of the vines and roots wrapped around him instead of arms. But now there were no roots, no vines, and no arms here; only cold, lifeless dirt. It was an endless nothing, a void he couldn't claw his way out of it.

Will tried. He tried to open his mouth to shout for help and swallowed mouthful after mouthful of dirt. He tried to push it away and more caved in around him. Will panicked and clawed harder, dug faster to try and bring himself to the surface as tears welled in his eyes and mixed with the soil to make mud. He kicked, struggled, and tried to break free but it didn't work; nothing worked.

Will started to sob but choked on what was left of his air.

Quite suddenly, hands plunged through the ground and gripped him

by the loose fabric of his shift. They pulled, dragged him up through the sediment, dragged him past the layers of shale, and pulled him into the warm, soothing night air. Will blinked, tried to clear his eyes of the silt he'd made with his tears and when he did, focused on a pair of the darkest brown eyes he'd ever seen.

"T- thank you," he gasped, relieved beyond measure, and grateful.

***You're welcome.***

The words hummed and buzzed in his mind, a gentle whisper. Will looked at the owner of the eyes, the person who'd pulled him free and spoken without having uttered a single word. He was tall, with curls so dark they were near black in the dim light, with high cheeks and a wide mouth. He wore robes that may have been woven from the sky itself, so blue and velvety soft. There was what looked like living vines cinched around his waist. As Will watched, the vines seemed to move on their own accord; they trembled and blooms sprouted. Will looked a little higher, saw pale skin beneath the collar of where the robes dipped and a pretty silver chain tucked just below the hem. Will blinked again and the man slowly released him.

"Do I know you?" Will asked, with the very unnerving feeling that they had met before. The man blinked at him and tilted his head.

***Do you?***

Will hesitated. That answer seemed playful, almost teasing, and not unkind. Will licked his dirty lips and considered.

"Do *you*... know *me*?" he asked instead.

The man smiled approvingly.

***I do.***

Will felt heat rise in his face, though he couldn't say why. He'd remember meeting someone like this, wouldn't he? Of all the people who passed through town, Will rarely forgot a face. It was a great hobby of his, to look them over and try to guess where they were from before asking. Ignoring the robes and the living belt made of vines (things obviously born from his overactive imagination and



mugwort), Will would certainly remember someone who looked like *that*. Will didn't even know men could be that... pretty.

It wasn't to say that the stranger was feminine, because he wasn't. Under his loose garb he was clearly all *man*, but his eyes were soft, his hair clean and fresh, and his nails were without dirt under them. Even the way he stood, the way he held himself was graceful, relaxed, even regal. He reminded Will of the great, oversized jungle cats he'd seen as a child. Will had stood, watching them lounge behind the bars of their cages, as if the people who gawked and stared at them were of no more concern to them than a fly. Will felt very small, and very common in comparison. He looked away from the stranger and focused on himself instead. There was dirt all over him; his face, his nails, even in his hair. Will quickly tried to brush it off but his shift was white and it did little to hide the stains. Will focused on his bare feet and flushed harder.

"Am I dreaming?" he asked, almost certain that he was but the way he'd felt lately, with the vivid daydreams and conversations with animals, maybe he'd finally cracked and was having full on hallucinations.

### ***Does it seem like a dream?***

Will glanced around while keeping his head ducked. Well, it certainly *looked* like a dream. He didn't remember the vegetation ever being this lush nor the soil so rich and black. The vines weaving and blooming around the man's waist couldn't be alive if their roots had been severed, could they? Will looked up, at the sky. The stars looked misaligned and too bright. Even the way the man spoke, without opening his mouth was impossible (if familiar). Will looked down again and nodded. He almost jumped out of his skin when warm, calloused hands touched his face to draw his gaze up.

### ***Does it feel like a dream?***

The hand felt real enough against his soiled face, solid, and Will choked back a cry. The ground beneath him felt real too, soft and teeming with life. He really had lost his mind.

The man in front of him cupped Will's face more fully, bent at the

waist to drag his lips across the tears that had started falling from Will's eyes again. Will thought he would jerk away, that he would fight or at least recoil from the sudden, unfamiliar, intimate contact. Instead, he stayed still as tears came harder and faster, until he couldn't even breathe. The man, the stranger, kissed all of them away until Will's dirty face was blotchy, but dry.

### ***Why are you crying?***

"I- I- " Will hiccupped as he wrapped his hands around the stranger's wrists. They were solid too. "I've done it, haven't I? I've cracked. I've lost it. They'll send me to an almshouse or an asylum, won't they?" he asked as he felt his eyes well again.

The man didn't pull away, didn't make a move to pry himself away from Will's clinging, filthy hands or distance himself from Will's hysterics. He kept his lips on Will's cheeks until the man was reduced to nothing more than whimpers.

It was ridiculous. He'd finally lost his marbles and was seeing things so real he could *touch them*. What he was seeing was so beautiful and otherworldly, and the deliverer of his realization... *Of course* it was a man, because Will couldn't be just *insane*, he had to be *one of those* too. Will knew the Old Gods didn't care, but once the church moved in during his childhood, attitudes changed. Things that used to go without question became unacceptable, or dirty secrets at best. Will knew Joyce used to dance nude under the stars, gather herbs like he did, and lay with people freely before the church. Now she wore the ankle length skirts and tucked away her hair so it never hung loose on her shoulders. Will couldn't conform, though he tried. He couldn't stop the feeling of desire for other men or the want to worship deep in the woods instead of confined to a small, artificial building. Will was so *wrong* in so many ways, it only made sense for him to fall completely apart in the most beautiful dreamscape he'd ever seen.

The ground beneath him was soft and Will felt like he could sink into it again, just let the earth consume him until he was no more.

### ***Stop. Don't go.***

"What?"

The man bent further and pressed a hand to Will's chest to get his attention. To his surprise, when he focused on the touch and what was happening around him, Will realized he actually *was* sinking. The dirt had gobbled him up, all the way up to his ankles, and he panicked again.

Will tried to pull himself free, had to cling to the other man to even pull one leg loose. The hand on his chest pressed harder.

***Rabbit heart. Calm down. You're safe. You're well. You're not dreaming and you haven't lost your mind. You're just waking up.***

"What? What does that mean," Will asked weakly as the man pulled him up and out of the ground for a second time.

The man ran his thumbs over Will's oil coated lids and pressed their heads together until their noses touched, entangled their fingers securely. He felt warm and solid and... like home. When the man pulled his hand away from Will's, he had a seed in his palm. Will blinked at it, confused as the man presented it to him as an offering.

***Make it grow.***

"I- I can't do that," Will protested, half laughing, so distracted by the outlandish request that he forgot his panic.

The dark brown eyes looked at him steadily, forehead still pressed to Will's so they were only a hair's breadth away.

***Make it grow.***

"I *can't*," Will insisted as he tried to take a step away.

***You can. You have. Have a little faith, Rabbit Heart.***

Will looked at the seed, just for a moment, before stepping away. With shaking hands, he offered his hand up and the stranger dropped the seed before Will could change his mind. Will curled his fingers around it instinctively, protectively.

***Make it grow.***

“How?” he whispered, totally bewildered by this terribly realistic and fantastical dream.

***Listen to it. You know how. You’ve always known how.***

Fine. If Will really was going mad, he might as well indulge this fantasy. It always lingered and played in the back of his mind anyway. He closed his eyes and tried to listen.

He heard the buzz, the murmuring hum that was constant background noise for most of his life. When the cat was around, the whispers were just that, insistent whispers. Standing here, with this man, in this dreamscape, they were almost howls. Will jerked, so startled by the sound and how loud it was that he almost dropped the seed. The stranger cupped his hands under Will’s to keep him steady and when he touched, when Will was really listening, it took his breath away.

It was a chorus of voices, all singing, all harmonizing together. Will still couldn’t understand the words but they felt familiar and comforting. He could feel the shell of the seed, felt the life inside of it and how it wanted to break free. Will urged it to, just to grow and squirm and push its way to freedom.

*Come on, you can do it.*

Will yelped in surprise as he felt something move in his hand. He jerked, so alarmed by the movement that he actually dropped the thing. On the ground at his feet was a seedling, still half in the shell. Will looked up, shocked, and the other man smiled. He looked so pleased that his eyes were half closed, nearly slits, and Will had the strangest feeling that if he could have, the man would have purred.

***Perfect. I knew you could.***

Will blushed so heavily he thought he might faint if his blood didn’t start flowing normally again. He looked away; not back to the seed or his own feet, but at the sky. It was churning with fluffy, heavy clouds, like an electric storm was rolling in. He watched it, transfixed, as purples and golds molded together, like they always belonged as one. Will looked back down when a hand touched his

face to draw his attention back to the stranger. The man bent again, closed the space between them and when his lips touched Will's, Will was so startled he just froze up, totally rigid and unmoving. The kiss was gentle, chaste, and it made Will's toes curl.

It wasn't that Will hadn't ever had an erotic dream before, but this wasn't that. This wasn't that *at all*. This was too... innocent, and far too real. This wasn't hands and bodies with no faces; Will could *feel* the other man, see him clearly, and even smell the electric on his skin and in the air. Will hesitated for a moment, still unsure if this was a dream or a hallucination or if by some miracle, real, and leaned in. He let out a small sound as the stranger drew him closer, deepened the kiss, and stroked his face. Will couldn't say for sure how long they stayed exchanging quiet, gentle kisses, but when he pulled away and blinked up at the other man, he was breathless.

"Who are you?"

The other man smiled kindly.

*Bairsearch I was called once, though it's not my name. My name is far simpler. I'm Michael. I've known you, Will, for a long time. I'm sorry it took me so long to recognize you. Things are just... so hazy most of the time.*

The man, Michael, pulled Will's hand to his mouth and kissed him over the raised, fresh, tender scar on the back of his hand.

"What? What does that mean?"

The man looked up, met Will's eyes while he kissed the scar gently.

*I know you, Will. I always have.*

"I don't understand," Will rasped as he watched the pink, swollen scar that had been bothering him with a constant ache and reduced mobility, start to fade to white, as if it had a years worth of healing already instead of a mere month.

*You will.*

The man pressed his hand against Will's chest again, let it rest there

for a long moment while neither spoke. Will didn't know why the cryptic words, with no offered explanation from the total stranger, didn't frighten him. He just knew they didn't. The man didn't even feel like a stranger, not really. After a moment of silence, the man, Michael, looked at him sadly.

***Time to wake up, Rabbit Heart. Danger draws near.***

"I thought I wasn't dreaming?"

The man kept smiling in that sad, longing way, but didn't answer the question.

***Come to me when you can, as quickly as you can. There is a bad scent in the air. Death and rot are coming.***

Will felt a chill, a creeping along his spine that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. He looked at the swirling sky, watched as dark clouds closed in around the colors. He looked back at the man, not sure whether or not he believed *any* of this, let alone that this fantastical, magic wielding man had a real, physical location. This had to be some manifestation of his anxieties about Joyce's earlier concerns, and his own loneliness mixed with the mugwort and the approaching Hunter's Moon. Still... Will felt the hand on his chest and it felt as real as anything else ever had.

"Where are you?" he asked softly, willing to take a risk.

The man hesitated, shifted back and away. It looked like he favored his left leg over the right, as he quickly redirected his weight from it to the other. That was strange. Will had never noticed any other people in his dreams with ailments or injury. He watched as the man opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was a dry rasp. For a moment, a look of frustration passed over his handsome face, and he clenched his jaw before relaxing and taking on the gentle smile he'd previously worn.

***There I shall gaze on the mountains again, on the fields and the woods and the burns in the glen. Away among the carried beyond human ken, in the haunts of the deer I shall roam.***

“In the sweet sounding language of home,” Will whispered in reply.

Michael smiled in pleasure and kissed Will’s healing wound again. He suddenly and without warning pressed the hand on Will’s chest harder, almost knocking the other man off his feet. Will windmilled his arms and stumbled back, but his foot plunged into the ground like it was made of overly wet clay. He was going to sink again. Michael watched him but didn’t seem alarmed in the slightest.

***Wake up.***

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

My semester is FINALLY OVER and I am so excited to have some peace and time to myself. I think this story will only last another chapter or two at most. It was a fun little break from some of my heavier content, and I’m hoping to have this finished up before school starts again in January.

As always, I hope you enjoyed it. Comments and kudos are always appreciated. Be well and take care of yourselves.

## 4. Chapter 4

### Summary for the Chapter:

Will wakes from his dream and finds himself stuck in a nightmare.

### Notes for the Chapter:

CW: Assault, bodily injury.

Will woke with a start, gasping and choking on the sediment that had collected in his lungs from where the earth had swallowed him. He clawed at the collar of his shift and nearly ripped it in his attempt to get clean, unobstructed air. He sucked in breath after breath, grateful to have it and grateful to be back in his own, lumpy cot.

*Calm down. Calm do you fool! There's nothing wrong, there's no mud in your lungs or ants in your hair. You were dreaming, it wasn't real and-*

Will cupped his hands around his face to push his tangled, sweat soaked hair out of his face. He jerked them away and looked down at his fingers, barely visible as the sun tried to climb its way into the sky, and froze. They were caked in dirt and left stains on his shift from where he'd touched it. No, that wasn't right. That wasn't possible. He may not have been the most pressed and spotless person in Viridity, but he always washed his hands. As Will threw his blanket aside, he saw there were stains and dirt *all over* his night clothes, not just the collar.

He rolled out of bed, his filthy and mud covered feet hitting the floorboards so loudly he was sure it could be heard all the way in the village. He stumbled to the door and flung it open without bothering to find his shoes. He had to clean up, had to get this mess off of himself before anyone saw.

But who was going to see? He lived alone, secluded and away from everyone, just like he wanted. The only pair of eyes that would fall on him here were Damora's. If he ran into the woods, covered in dirt in filth and down to the river, someone would see him, someone who



could *talk*. It was early, the perfect time for fishing and with his luck, Will would wander right into a whole group of anglers or worse, the hunters, while looking every bit the madman.

He turned back to the house and forced himself to ignore his pounding heart and go inside. He'd been sleepwalking, that was all. He'd been sleep walking again, just like he used to when he was a kid and Jonathan would have to go and fetch him from wherever he'd wandered off to. He was usually found in one of the fox or rabbit holes he'd had spent time widening in his search for the great underground world he was sure lay just below his feet. That's what had happened last night. Will had been sleep walking and he'd, he'd just fallen asleep in the dirt until something had pulled him home, disgusting as he was, back into his bed.

Will stripped, threw his night clothes into a sack, and dressed quickly. He scrubbed himself as best he could with water from Damora's trough while she knickered at him and stomped her hooves.

"Sorry, I promise I'll replace it," he assured her, but she just blinked at him.

He scrubbed so hard his skin turned red and blotchy. It ached at each touch, just as his chest ached from how fast and hard his heart had been pounding.

***Come to me when you can, as quickly as you can. There is a bad scent in the air. Death and rot are coming.***

Where the hells did that thought come from? Where was he supposed to go? *Who* was he supposed to go to? Will splashed more water on his face and as it turned to mud and rolled down his cheeks, he had a sudden, visceral reaction to the feeling. That, and the feeling of lips on his face, kissing the mud and tears away.

Will flushed, suddenly hot despite the cool wind on his wet skin. That *had* to have been a dream. No matter how real it might have felt at the time, someone, *anyone* stooping and lowering their standards enough to show more than a passing interest in him, let alone kissing dirt and tears away from his face, was someone his own mind had made up. There was no possible way anyone, let alone someone as

beautiful as the person Will was remembering from his dream, someone whose clothes looked like they were woven from the night sky, and whose skin was so clear and warm, without a single blemish or scar, would ever be able to look at a dirt covered, near urchin that Will was and offer anything as affectionate as a kiss.

Will pressed a hand to his chest to calm himself down and took a shuddering breath.

***Rabbit Heart. Calm down. You're safe. You're well.***

He could still feel it, the press of a palm larger than his against his chest, solid and real. Will looked up to the sky, as the sun started its longest journey of the year, and blinked. He had to visit Joyce. She'd always followed the Old Gods, even if she pretended to be as pious and churchgoing as the next person in town. She used to gather herbs and scry in the fires of their oven and always left gifts for the Fair Folk of the wood. She'd always known about Will's dreams and daydreams and she'd never tried to stifle them. She'd know what they meant and what to do.

Will rode at a trot, trying not to seem in a hurry and draw attention. Behind him, beside him, the woods whispered their songs, trying to entice him in. He hesitated, pulled Damora to a stop so listen. She stomped her hooves in agitation and flicked her ears, as if she could hear it too. He stroked her neck, just below the mane, and tugged lightly at the bit. It was the longest day of the year, he had plenty of time to make it to Joyce's with his questions. He squeezed his thighs around the mare and tapped with his heels until she, reluctantly, turned to head toward the wood.

It was a path they both knew well, though few took it these days, and they navigated it with ease and, on Will's part, urgency. The smell of rot was strong, but the songs were louder this way and he followed them, sure that if he got just a little closer, he'd finally be able to understand what they said.

He pulled the reins back, halting Damora, and slid off her back.

"Stay here, okay pretty girl?"

She snorted, blinked her large, dark eyes in what he assumed was agreement, and knickered softly. Will kissed her velvety soft muzzle, just above her nostrils. Her warm breath tickled his face and he smiled.

“I’m going to be right back. I just want to have a look around and we’ll be on our way, alright?”

She snorted again and shook her head, dislodging the flies that had tried to land. Will moved away from her, towards the stench of decay and towards the bog. He paused a good distance away from the edge, just in case the earth decided to give way and swallow him up only to be spat back out years later as a picked clean skeleton. Even as a kid he’d never gotten too close and he wasn’t about to now, no matter how tempting the voices and dreams tried to make it seem.

***‘Come to me.’***

Will sat cross legged and looked at the black, dirty water. Why on earth would he think *this* was the place he was meant to go? It was filthy, disgusting, poisoned, and little more than a grave, a shadow of what it used to be.

He closed his eyes and frowned. Will pursed his lips together and waited.

“I’m here,” he called. “Is this the right place?”

The only response he was given was Damora huffing and stomping her hoof. Will chewed his lip.

“What am I supposed to be doing? This is so foolish, so stupid...”

He rolled his shoulders and tried to center himself, tried to remember more of the dream.

***‘Make it grow.’***

Make *what* grow, exactly? There was nothing here, nothing but drowned and black roots. Nothing could grow here, not for long anyway. It was annoying in all honesty. All the land around was dry and drained of nutrition, all save for here, and this wet, rich, black

soil was the only place things refused to grow. If curses were real, this place was, without a doubt, afflicted. He sighed and flopped onto his back. He let his hands wander over the sticky, decaying grass, searching for anything that felt like it might still be alive. There was nothing.

*You're an idiot, Byers. You know that, right? What are you doing out here when you should be home, or at Mama's? At least she'd feed and clothe you, maybe even boil some water for you to wash in. Instead, you're wasting time chasing dreams and ghosts.*

"Happy Birthday to me," he mumbled, eyes still closed, listening to the sad, distant songs only he could hear.

"What are you doing out here, Byers?"

Will opened his eyes and rolled onto his knees. He frowned harder when he saw Hargrove standing next to Damora, a hand on her flank.

"What are *you* doing out here, Billy?" he shot back, pushing himself into a seated position. "You get lost?"

"No," the older man said with a sneer. He ran a hand over Damora's side and up her neck. The mare shook her head and snorted, apparently just as displeased with Hargrove's presence as Will was. "Just looking for something."

"What, a bar of soap?" Will asked, wrinkling his nose. Billy stunk like stale, day old beer. Will could smell it from here and it made his stomach turn. Billy had obviously been part of the group last night that had been wandering the wood, drinking, and looking for dead witches.

Billy laughed, a harsh, scratchy sound.

"Actually, as luck would have it, I found what I was looking for."

"Good for you," Will huffed, uninterested. "Found yourself another cat to shoot or a small child to terrify? You must be pleased."

The harsh, gravely laughter came again and Billy took a step closer, hands falling away from Damora as he went.

“Funny you should mention cats. How’s it been treating you? The one I shot last month?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Will said, less than confident in how convincing his response might have been. “Only thing I found was a dead raccoon.”

“Is that so? See,” Billy said with a lopsided smile. “I came back looking for it. Saw the mangy thing wandering around your field but every time I tried to catch it, it slipped through my fingers. Seems to me it’s taken up residence in that shithole you call a home.”

“Why were you trespassing on my property?” Will growled, angry. He must not have made himself clear enough that night, when he’d put a bullet in the air to scare Hargrove off. He should have put one in Billy’s leg.

“No trespassing happening now, and no gun to chase me off with,” Billy pointed out, as if he’d heard Will’s thoughts. He moved closer to the where Will sat, though somewhat off to the side, as if he was looking at something in the placid, unmoving water. Will rolled his eyes.

“What do you want, Hargrove? You said you found what you were looking for, so where is it then?” he asked, motioning around. “Where’s the cat? Did it slip away again when you were too drunk to wrangle it?” he asked, sure that Billy was lying. Merle may have left, but that didn’t mean he’d been caught by an idiotic lug like Billy Hargrove.

Billy looked away from the water and down to Will, an amused expression in his face.

“Oh, I wasn’t looking for a cat. I was looking for a witch.”

Will couldn’t help but laugh at that, though Billy didn’t seem to share his humor.

“A witch? *You* found the witch, did you? The one that’s been dead two decades? Well, good on you, Billy. That’s quite the accomplishment.” Will waved his hand in mock fanfare. “You must

be proud.”

Billy smiled and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“No, not a dead one. Found one alive and kicking. Gonna sell it to the hunters and use the reward to finally get away from this cursed place.”

For a moment, Will felt his heart flop over in his chest. The smile he wore faltered as confusion washed over him.

“What? What live witch? What are you on about?”

Billy ignored him and twisted to look back towards the trail. It was at least a hundred yards away. He turned back to Will, still smiling, still infuriatingly pleased with himself.

“Found it wandering around where it shouldn’t be,” Billy said in a sing song way. Will pushed his hands against the ground and started to push himself to his feet. Billy tsked and took a step closer. “Hang on now, where are you going?”

“I’m not playing this game with you, Billy. You didn’t find anything other than the bottom of a bottle, let alone a witch.”

“Of course I did. Found it right here,” Billy insisted, eyes trained on Will.

Will blinked up, starting to get nervous.

“Really? Did it rise out of the swamp and you what, netted it?” Is that why the dream had ended so suddenly?

Billy’s smile widened.

“Haven’t caught it yet.”

Will felt his heart flip again, and he pushed himself up, trying to find his feet, but Billy landed on his back, making his legs buckle and knocking the wind from him. Will squirmed, his face pressed so hard into the ground there was dirt in his teeth. He clawed at it, tried to grip it to pull himself out from under Billy, but it crumbled away in

his fingers. There was no root system for him to gain traction with, nothing he could pull against used to yank himself free.

“Are you still drunk, Hargrove?” he shouted, more angry than afraid. Billy might have been a bully, but he hadn't ever actually hurt Will, not since they were kids. “Get off of me, idiot. I’m no witch!”

“Aren’t you? Got that familiar following you around, doing your bidding,” Billy hissed, trying to restrain Will as he wiggled and squirmed. “Everyone’s talking about it, everyone knows what you are. Why are you the only one who can cultivate the land if you haven't made some dark pact with it? I knew it the moment I saw you that you weren't human, but no one believed me. I saw the baby that came out of Joyce that night and it was dead. I saw the witch wrap up that blue, lifeless thing and take it away. When it came back, there you were, squalling and squawking and alive. You’re unnatural. I tried to prove it, prove that you were a witch or a changeling but your idiot brother pulled you from the water and I got whipped within an inch of my life. But then the hunters started asking about you and they believed me, they knew you just as unnatural as I did. Now everyone knows it.”

“Get *off* me,” Will panted, kicking and thrashing where he lay. “You’re insane, you know that? I’m no changeling. I don’t know what you saw, but you imagined it. And I don't have any gods cursed cat,” he growled, gripping a handful of dirt and slinging it over his shoulder, hoping to strike Billy in the eyes so he’d at least be distracted enough to let up on some of the weight he had on Will. It didn’t work, at least, not well. Will managed to pull himself a few inches before Billy was back to pinning him, one knee pressed so hard against the back of Will’s neck and shoulders that Will could barely breathe.

“Don’t try that. I’m not stupid enough to let you put a hex on me with grave dirt.”

“I’m not trying to hex you!” Will rasped, earning himself a punch to the back of the head. His teeth clacked together and for a moment, he saw stars. When his vision cleared, he growled again. “If everyone believes you, why didn’t you come to my house last night? There was an entire mob wandering around! Are you telling me none of you

thought to just knock on my door?”

“We tried to go last night. No one could find it. Can you imagine that? All of us together and none of us could find the way there? What sort of spell is that?”

“I didn’t cast any spells!” Will insisted, furious. “You were all too drunk to find it is all!”

“Bullshit. Everyone knows where you live. Between all of us, someone would have found it.”

Will struggled again, tried to draw his knees up under himself. If he could do that, if he could get the leverage, he might be able to buck Billy off of him. Will reached out, seeking another handful of dirt and twisted his head to watch where he was aiming this time. When he saw the knife, he froze.

“Wait! Billy! Wait wait wait wait don’t-”

The knife came down and Will shrieked so loud he made his own ears ring. The hand he’d been using to try for the dirt was impaled on the blade, almost cut clean in two, and trapped. Where the blade came out from his palm, it buried into the ground, pinning the hand in place. Will’s shout died to a whine, his throat too raw to sustain it any longer. He looked at his hands, shocked, and tried to pull reflexively. It hurt, *fuck* it hurt. Even moving at all made the blade cut at him, threaten to tear more. Will blinked at his hand, tears welling as he whimpered again. Would he ever be able to use it again? The blade felt like it was scrapping bone. If it went clean through, it could have broken some, but the whole thing hurt too badly to even hope to determine the damage in the moment. What about the tendons? The nerves? He wanted to try and move his fingers, but was afraid. At least it hurt at all, right? That had to mean that there were still nerves that were undamaged.

“There now, no more of that. No more throwing things at me or casting hexes. Settle down before I put another one in your other hand.”

Will strained to look over his shoulder without moving his arm.



"Billy, please," he tried. "Think this over. Please, you don't want to do this. You made a mistake, that's all. Take the knife out and- and I'll leave. I'll go home and pack and you'll never see me again."

Billy leaned forward, putting more pressure on Will's neck, choking him.

"Stop it. No talking unless you want your tongue cut out too. Didn't I just say no more spells?"

"I'm not," Will tried to say, but the air was crushed out of his lungs.

*I'm not casting any spells, you lunatic! I've never cast a spell in my life!*

His vision was cloudy, starting to grey out among the edges from the lack of air, and he felt himself start to go limp. Maybe if he was still, Billy would stop the cruelty and just take him back to town. He might just tie Will up and throw him over Damora's back and when they got there, someone would stop this madness. Someone would look at what Billy had done and set Will free. They'd take him to the apothecary and they'd be able to save his hand, mangled as it was, and he'd retain *some* of its functionality. Somewhere far away, he heard ringing, a chorus of angry voices.

"You settle down? Good. You know, you might think I'm a monster, but I really don't want to hurt you anymore than needs to be done."

*You don't **need** to hurt me at all. I'm not going to fight. I'm not going to fight you on this. Just take me back, take me somewhere where someone can see what you did and stop you.*

Above him, Billy moved, adjusted his weight and Will sucked in a breath unobstructed for the first time in close to a minute. Will licked his lips to wet them, but resisted the urge to speak. When Billy sat back on his heels, Will rolled his head up to look at his impaled hand. He shouldn't touch it or try to move it, but he reached for it tentatively with the free one. He stopped when he felt Billy lean back down, his mouth next to Will's ear.

"Don't even try to take it out."

"I wasn't..."

“Good. You don’t have the angle to do it from here. Probably just fuck it up even more than it is.” Billy pulled away and tsked again. “Shit, that looks like it hurts. Does it hurt? Can a witch even feel pain? I heard the last one didn’t even struggle when they drowned it.”

*I’m not a witch, you maniac. You’ve known me my whole life! You’ve seen me get hurt, you know I spent an entire winter with my arm in a sling when I fell off the roof trying to rethatch it! What the hells is **wrong** with you?*

He didn’t say any of that though, too afraid of what Billy might do if he did. Will kept it to himself as he panted and tried to blink the tears away. He winced when Billy grabbed a handful of his hair and pressed Will’s face back into the dirt while he positioned himself to get the leverage he needed to pull the knife free.

It hurt almost as bad coming out as it did going in, and Will pulled the throbbing, bleeding thing towards himself in an attempt to cradle it, to stop the bleeding against his shirt. Billy huffed and yanked him up by the hair, onto his knees, and pulled him onto his back. Will kicked, tried to find his balance as Billy started walking, dragging Will by the hair all the while. Will couldn’t find his footing and his neck ached from both the painful angle he was being dragged by and the bruising he could already feel forming there. He didn’t even realize where Billy was taking him until he heard Damora chuff and knicker. He focused on the sound. It didn’t sound like they were getting any closer to her at all.

He couldn’t get a good look around, couldn’t see anything but sky. Still, as he kicked his heels to try and right himself, the earth felt soft, mushy, like it was wet and sinking beneath him. They were getting closer to the bog.

“Billy, where are we going?” he gasped, panic setting in again. He thought he knew, but hoped it was just wild speculation, his imagination running away with him.

“Quiet. I’ll still cut your tongue out if I need to,” Billy warned, and Will felt his teeth start to chatter. He weighed his options as quickly as he could. It might piss Billy off and lose him his tongue, but if Will

could make him stop moving and change his position, maybe he'd be able to stop him from taking Will to the place he was almost certain they were going.

"Wait, wait wait wait! Hargrove, stop! Don't do this," he croaked. "Take me back to the village. Go find the hunters and get your reward. Don't do this," he begged.

"Sorry, but I can't risk you trying something on the way there. It's safer to just get this over with and collect the reward for your corpse. If memory serves, you still can't swim, right? And we already know drowning kills witches. You made this pretty easy on me by coming all the way out here."

Will choked, fear making him freeze. He *couldn't* swim; he'd never learned. He'd been too afraid to ever try after the time Billy tossed him in the river almost twenty years ago. Billy was going to throw him in again and no one knew how deep the bog was; some people said it was bottomless. There would be nothing for him to press his feet against and push himself back up to the surface if Billy threw him in there. Will started struggling anew.

"Let me go! Get the hells off of me! Hargrove, I'm serious! Let me go, now!"

Another punch to the head made Will stop, only for a second, before he started thrashing as hard as he could.

"Devils take you, Billy Hargrove! I curse you!" he shouted, hoping that this fool's superstitious fears would win and Will would be let go. "I curse you for a thousand years! I curse you so that every move you make, you're struck by vipers! I curse you to have all your bones break and crack to dust! I curse you to suffer your entire life! I curse you with wolves at your door and worms in your flour! I curse you forever!"

He clawed at the hand in his hair, leaving blood in his wake and under his nails. Good. At least he'd hurt Hargrove, even a little. He was shocked when Billy let him go, so shocked that he fell flat onto his back and smacked his head against the soft, wet ground. Will blinked up. His hair was wet. The bog was right behind him. Will

tried to roll, but Billy crouched over him, straddling his chest, and his hands went to Will's neck.

"Stop. Talking. Witch," Billy hissed as his hands tightened their hold, choking Will and squeezing the life out of him. When Billy raised him up and forced his body back, Will tried to take as deep a breath as he could. How much it mattered was up for debate, because when Billy slammed him back down, it was directly into the black, stagnant water.

Will kicked, as hard as he could from where he was trapped, but barely did more than dig his heels into the ground. He tried to pry Billy's hand away from his throat, but only one of his worked and it was a useless fight. Billy's grip was too strong, it was too tight, and Will felt the air being squeezed out of his lungs, felt the bubbles escape his nose and mouth as he tried to scream. The black, horrible water flowed into his mouth and it tasted like a grave, like *his* grave.

*I don't want to die like this, I'm not ready! I haven't even done anything! What did I do to deserve this? Refuse to go worship in the church? Have unusual dreams? Hear voices and songs no one else heard? What harm was in that? Why does that deserve death?*

Will felt himself sinking into the water, into the earth that he still kicked at. He felt it open up and swallow him, just as surely as he was swallowing water. It was warm and soft and he was going to suffocate in it if the hands on his throat didn't suffocate him first. Will opened his mouth to scream his fear and his rage to the world, to anyone who was listening, as a death knell, and found himself unable to make any sounds at all past the wet, thick earth that flowed in when he tried.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm not sure how everyone will feel about this, but I hope it was alright. I know that it's taken a bit of a dark turn, but I hope you hang in there because there are good times ahead.

As always, kudos and comments are appreciated. Be well and take care of yourselves.

## 5. Chapter 5

### Summary for the Chapter:

Will finds the place he was always meant to be.

### Notes for the Chapter:

CW: Some gore/body horror. Mild sexual content.  
Mild internalized homophobia.

He was falling. Whether he was falling into the bog or falling to sleep as consciousness left him, he didn't know. He knew he was heavy and weak, and that he didn't have enough strength to push the hands on his throat away anymore.

*How disappointing. This isn't how I wanted to go. Not by being drowned by Billy fucking **Hargrove** of all people. What a waste of a life.*

### Fight back.

*Why? How? What's the point? He's stronger than me. He's uninjured and angry and he's wanted to kill me for years. What am I supposed to do?*

**Fight back. Wake up and fight if you want to live. Or do you really want to die here, like this?**

Will twitched as the mud and muck filled his ears and nose. He *didn't* want to die here. He didn't want to die at all, but certainly not this way. He kicked and thrashed as he sunk into the clay around him and wrapped him in its embrace. Clay was warm, even deep under water. It held nutrients rich enough to fertilize his fields for half a summer if it spread it right, and it was strong enough to anchor roots to the land. Will used it as his anchor now as he let it swallow him.

There was nothing frightening about the earth around him, and Will had never been afraid of the dark. He wasn't about to start now.

He lashed out, not with his hands or feet, but with the part of himself he never wanted to name. It was the part of him that Joyce never acknowledged, not even to stifle; the part that let him hear the earth

and feel the roots around him. It was the part that the painfully beautiful stranger had asked him to tap into and set free when he was dreaming.

When he did, the hands fell away, and Will sank deeper into the mud and clay. His lungs hurt and he knew, even though he *felt* safe, he was still going to suffocate. He struggled as long as he could to hold on to what was left of the breath in his lungs, but it was a useless endeavor. He felt it slip away from him and, reflexively, took another, frantic breath in. He'd been keeping his eyes closed to protect them from the contaminated water and sediment, but he opened them now, and for a moment, was confused. Confused because the hands around his neck were gone, and not because he'd pulled Billy into the water with him, but confused because he was alone. Alone and, inexplicably, on dry land. He could breathe.

Well, not *exactly* dry land as he found himself half submerged in rich, dark peat, with little beetles and worms crawling over his face and through his hair. He blinked to clear his vision as flakes of dirt and decomposing vegetation fell into them, and looked up at a sky he didn't recognize, with a sun so pale and blue, he almost wept from the sight. He gasped, raised his hands, and started trying to claw his way out.

It was easier this time than it had been in the dream, even without an extra set of hands to help. This time he knew what to do, and he wasn't afraid. Will pulled himself from the earth and crouched on his knees, exhausted, but grateful to be what he assumed was alive. He might have thought he was dead, that he'd slipped from the plane of the living to the spirit realm, but when he looked to the sky again, everything was as it should have been. Whatever it was he'd seen when he first opened his eyes was gone. There was no blue sun, no triple moons, and no unexplained birdlike things that floated above him on wings that would have been more suited to moths than anything avian. What there was, however, was a small, rough, pink tongue licking at his face.

"Merle," he whispered, voice choked from emotion. "Hey, you're alive. Where have you been?"

The cat merely looked at him, blinked his large, yellow eyes, and

continued the endeavor of his attempts to groom the dirt and filth from Will's skin. Will reached out, overcome with emotion to not only be alive, but to see a friendly face, even a feline one. He scooped the cat into his arms and flopped down onto his backside. He curled around the cat until his nose was buried so deep in the thick, black fur, he felt he could have vanished into it entirely. When the first tears rolled from his eyes, he didn't bother to try and stop them.

"I missed you. Where did you go?"

Against his chest, he felt a deep, rhythmic, rumbling purr. It soothed Will, and Merle kneaded against his arm, as if trying to comfort him. Will laughed when the pointed claws dug into his skin, even though it hurt, because it meant this was real and he wasn't dreaming. He'd never been hurt in a dream and he doubted the first injury he'd received would be from something as comforting and gentle as the giant tom in his arms.

He uncurled himself and wiped his good hand across his eyes to clear the tears while continuing to cradle the cat with his injured one. Merle nuzzled against his chin, scent marking him, and mewed softly.

"I'm okay. I am, I promise. Billy, the maniac, he tried to kill me. Got me good here, see?" Will said, holding up his mangled hand. "I got away. I don't know how, but it's okay now. I'm okay."

**You did well.**

"Thanks," Will laughed before stopping himself and staring down at the feline. "Did... did you do something? Did you bring me here?"

**No. You did that yourself.**

"Where are we?"

The cat purred, rubbed its head against Will's wounded hand, and stretched itself to look at him. Will blinked down at him, at the long line of Merle's neck exposing the chain and key around it. Will hesitated, his broken, useless hand near the chain, his fingers brushing it.

**Take it.**

"I can't take that," Will breathed, his hand dropping away.

**It's yours.**

Will shook his head, trying to scoot away from the cat, but it bumped its head against his chin again, insistent.

**It's yours. It's always been yours.**

"No, it's not. It belongs to the witch and... I'm not a witch. I'm just Will. Just a stupid, plain old baker. I can't take that."

**Will. Take it. Please.**

With shaking hands, Will ran his fingers down the length of the cat's neck and hooked them below the chain. His heart felt like it was beating out of his chest and he was sure he would die from it, but Merle rubbed against him affectionately, only pulling away to duck his head completely out from under the chain, until it dangled free in Will's hand. Will looked at it, horrified and mesmerized. It almost seemed to vibrate, as if there was something alive inside that yearned for freedom. He blinked, startled when Merle leapt from his lap and began trotting away.

"W- wait. What am I supposed to do with this?"

The cat looked back at him, yellow eyes unblinking.

**Use it.**

"I... I can't find the hut," he protested, and it sounded weak and pathetic. He knew he could find it if he tried. Before, with the hunters, he hadn't *wanted* to find it. He'd wanted the hunters to leave him alone, wanted to be helpful, but he hadn't actually wanted them to know where it was. Merle switched his tail, clearly unimpressed with the argument.

**You can find it.**

Merle's confidence (and Will was certain that's who he was talking to because there was no one else around and for all the gods sake who else could he possibly be talking to?) gave him courage, and he



pushed himself to his feet. He stumbled along, almost tripping over the roots and vines beneath his feet, and followed the cat as it wove in and out of the growth without hesitation.

Will had always known things grew better out here, that they flourished where residual magic lingered, but he'd never seen it quite like this. This was just... extreme.

The scent of flowers filled his nose while the hum of bees filled his ears. Not the kind of buzzing he'd been hearing his whole life, but real, *actual* animals that buzzed around from plant to plant, carrying their life from one to the next. Will found himself laughing, amazed to see so many together. He's only ever seen a handful of hives in his life and never swarms in such numbers. He wanted to stay and watch them, but if he did, he would have lost sight of the cat in the underbrush. So Will walked through them, the gentle feel of their wings on his skin, and hurried to catch up. He only stopped when he saw the cat trot up to the dilapidated but intact hut and sit next to the door, expectantly.

Will approached, unsure, and looked to the cat. It merely looked back, ears twitching.

Was this really allowed? No one had set foot in here in almost a quarter of a century and it felt like a crime, or at the very least, some great mistake that *he* of all people should be the one to do it now. But Merle bumped against his legs, encouraging and giving him strength, so with breath caught in his throat, he inserted the key and twisted it.

He wasn't sure what he expected. Maybe he thought the key wouldn't fit or that the door would be too swollen from rain and disuse to open, but neither happened. It swung inward, revealing black only cut by a few streams of light from where the vines and ivy hadn't over taken the windows. Merle trotted in while Will stood outside, too afraid to move. When he found his courage and stepped in, he smelled something sweet, like the spun sugar passing entertainers would sell on their way to grander places than his pathetic little hamlet.

He looked around, eyes taking a moment to adjust to the dark, and focused on the little figure moving through the legs of chairs and

over the pit where a cauldron hung from a hook. This was it? The great treasure of the witch? It looked remarkably clean all things considered, and well organized though it lay unused for so long, but there were no piles of gold or jewels, not rich silks draped upon every surface. Will closed his eyes and breathed in the sweet scent while he tried to focus his thoughts. He only opened them again when he heard the low, pained yowl from somewhere ahead of him.

Will stepped around the furniture, trying to find the source of the sound, and froze when he saw Merle twisting and writhing before him. He fell to his knees to scoop the cat up and figure out what was painning him, but the cat hissed and pulled away. Will watched in horror as the cat contorted and convulsed on the floor, as if someone had fed him poison. Had he stumbled into something dangerous? An old poultice gone sour? He let out one low, horrible sound after another and Will bent to pick him up. He didn't care if he got scratched or bitten, he wasn't going to let Merle writhe around and possibly die alone, with no one holding him.

"Hold still," he soothed, stroking his hands along the cat's silky fur. "It's okay. You'll be okay. There has to be something here that can help you," he whispered, eyes scanning the shelves and counters, trying to decipher the writing on jars he couldn't read. Will didn't need to read them; he'd recognize the herbs by sight and if not that, smell.

Will rose to his feet, touching the stiff, trembling creature as he went, and hurried to the surprisingly dust free shelves. He ran his hands over the jars, pulled the corks from bottles, searching for lobelia, mayapple, boneset, milkweed, *anything* he could shove into the cat's mouth to make him vomit up whatever he'd ingested that was making him squirm and twist that way. Behind him, the yowls turned to moans and Will grabbed the closest thing he could find, joe pye weed, and turned. He almost dropped the jar when he saw what was happening.

The cat was shuddering, contorted in what looked like the most painful spasms Will could imagine. When he heard the first crack and pop of bones shifting and coming out of place, he felt his throat grow so tight he couldn't even swallow. He watched, unable to move, as the cat threw his head back and Will heard a snap, as if Merle had

just broken every bone in his neck. When Will tried to force himself to step closer, he couldn't move. It felt like someone had filled his boots with lead or thatched him down with rope. He was forced to watch as the animal jerked and squealed so loud it made Will's ears ring.

But even if he could move, Will had no idea what he would have done. It looked like Merle was being split in two, like a seam had been torn open down his back while blood and something pale pushed its way out. It looked like Merle had swallowed a monster, and now the monster was ripping its way out of his body one terrible inch at a time.

The thing that emerged from the ruin that was Will's friend was covered in blood and thicker things. It was coated in what looked like tree sap and it curled over itself, panting and wheezing. It took Will almost a full minute to realize what he was looking at was a *man*, hunched and naked, his hands clawing at the wooden floor as he shook with cold and continued to twitch. Will took a step back, having no way of justifying what had just happened, and the floorboard squeaked. The man looked up, dark eyes wide, and drew his lips back in what might have been a snarl, or perhaps pain.

"Will," the man croaked, as if he hadn't spoken in ages.

He was certain he was about to faint, that he would fall to the floor and crack his head open on the ground, but miraculously, didn't. When his vision came back into focus and he was seeing in color again instead of the grey fog that tried to overtake him, he took a breath to scream.

"Rabbit Heart, be calm."

"W- What in the hells..."

"You're safe, you're well."

"What by the gods is happening?"

He did fall then, just back a step and into the counter. He used his hands to catch himself and knocked a few of the jars away, breaking

some as they struck the ground. The man looked at him with huge, unblinking eyes, and started to push himself to his feet. His stance was wobbly, off kilter, as if he was a newborn foal. Will scooted away, eyes wide as he tried to process what was happening.

Because this slimy, blood soaked thing that crawled out of the body of his cat was the same man he'd seen in his dream. Even coated in filth, hair a matted, horribly overgrown mass of curls that stuck to his face, he was beautiful. Will kept edging away, eyes darting around for an escape. There was no way he was supposed to be here, this was a mistake. He never should have opened the door to this place, never should have let what was clearly an unnatural, dangerously powerful entity loose from the vessel it had been trapped in.

"Will, calm down," the man whispered, expression softening.

"Who are you?" Will demanded, impressing himself with how steady his voice was.

"You know me. You've always known me."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Will breathed, knowing it was a lie. The man reached out, his long, delicate fingers, and stopped only inches from Will's chest.

"You know me."

"I... do know you," he whispered. "Why do I know you? Because of the dream?"

The man, Michael, Will remembered, smiled softly.

"You've known me for longer than that. You've known me from the moment you took your first breath."

Will didn't want to think it was true. After all, he'd been an infant, not even capable of forming memories, but the way the man spoke, the scent of his skin, and the softness of his eyes didn't lie. Will *did* know him, and he always had.

"Why? What... why do I recognize you in a way that-" *makes me feel whole* "I've not felt before? You're more than a familiar face,

you're..."

"Because you have within you, a piece of me. It was a gift I gave you when you were no more than a few moments old."

Will laughed, not because he was trying to be disrespectful or sound ungrateful for whatever gift the witch had given him, but because it sounded insane.

"What are you, my fairy godmother?" he asked, trying to soothe the tension he felt with a joke.

The man just looked at him, unblinking, in the most unsettling way. Will felt his nervous smile fade under the weight of that look.

"I'm the one that brought you into the world, and breathed life into you when it tried to flee to darkness."

Will gripped the counter so hard his knuckles turned white. He knew his had been a hard delivery, and he knew his mother had needed more than the village midwives to assist. He knew Billy believed Will had been born dead. Will knew he was the reason for the pain and hardship his village had gone through, even if they never said it to his face. He knew why people looked at him sideways and why he'd never fit in. He knew it was his fault the witch had died.

"You're the witch?" he asked, unsure. "Not just *a* witch, you're *the* witch, aren't you? The one they killed?" Will looked him over, still uncertain. He didn't seem like the walking corpses that Will heard stories about. He didn't look like a mindless, soulless thing that walked the night wrecking havoc. He looked warm and lush and very much alive. "Where have you been?"

Michael lowered his hand until it lay flush against Will's chest, mixing the dirt from Will's clothes with the blood on his fingers. He looked... sad.

"Lost."

"Lost? Lost where?" Will asked, leaning into the touch. "What does that mean?"

“In the inbetween worlds.”

Will glanced over at the bloody mess on the floor and felt his stomach knot.

“Did you... did you kill my cat? *Your* cat, I mean?” he asked, sorrow building up in his chest when the witch’s fingers rested. “Did you kill him to get back here? From where you were trapped?”

Mike looked at what remained of the animal and smiled.

“No.”

Well, it certainly *looked* dead to Will. He looked back to the witch, unconvinced though unsure why he’d lie.

“My familiar left when they tried to kill me, the first time I slipped into the inbetween. I just borrowed his body, his form, to return and keep watch over my home.”

“What? How?” Will asked, eyes trained on the husk that was the cat, trying to convince himself that Merle wasn’t gone, that he hadn’t been torn apart from the inside out by the man in front of him. It was difficult not to give into the grief, the pain of his loss. Even more difficult to accept that the person in front of him was the same creature.

“The same way I saved your life. I have many talents, but one gift I’m proud of is flesh shaping. It’s how I forced your lungs to open and your heart to beat. It’s how,” Mike bent his head, scooped Will’s mutilated hand in his and kissed it. Beneath his wide lips, the flesh began to mend. Will almost jerked it away out of shock, but managed to keep himself composed. When Mike drew back, the wound was healing, covered with fresh, tender scar tissue. “I escaped.”

“There was no body,” Will whispered, repeating the stories he’d been told.

“No, there wasn’t.”

“Then why didn’t you come back?” Will demanded, suddenly angry. “When the hunters left, why didn’t you come back?”

Mike released his hand and looked away.

"I'm sorry. I was confused, lost. The longer I spent in that form and the more I spent passing between this world and that of the Fae, the harder it was to remember how to... how to think. I couldn't remember how to return. I couldn't remember your face, though I saw you often. I saw you grow up. I heard your music sing to mine, and some part of me recognized you, even if I didn't understand. Because your magic is mine, or a part of it is."

Will looked away, ashamed. So everything that made him special, everything that made him able to hear the whispers of the plants and feel them grow was stolen. Mike cupped his cheek and forced Will to face him, even if he couldn't force Will to actually meet his gaze.

"Why are you hiding, Rabbit Heart?"

"I'm sorry," Will whispered. "If you hadn't saved me, if I hadn't stolen some of your powers, that wouldn't have happened to you," he apologized, face red with shame. Shame because he'd inadvertently killed this man, and shame because he'd cursed his village with his very birth. Billy had been right. He'd been right to try and kill him.

"Will, you didn't steal anything from me," Mike said, as if he'd heard the thoughts, Will's secret disgrace, and wanted to rebuke the opprobrium. "Your mother was a true believer, a daughter of the woods and fae. It's in your blood just the same as mine. You were always meant to have gifts. The magic I gave you was always meant to be yours. I only breathed into you, and it was a gift, not something you stole from me. The part of me you hold is only in the flesh, not the spirit. What you have," Mike said, touching Will's dirty face. "Your elemancy is yours and yours alone."

"But... "

"It's *yours*," Mike insisted, bending to kiss Will's cheek. "My gentle one, you've taken nothing that I didn't want to give. You have nothing to apologize for."

Will wanted to cry, wanted to sink into the ground and stay there, hidden away until he could control himself and think clearly. But

there was no earth beneath his feet, only hard wood planks, and he couldn't escape. Instead of disappearing to hide or saying something sensible, he just looked up at Mike, horrified, and blurted out "I used to rub your belly. You let me play with your paws and use your tail as a mustache. I called you a fleabag and- and-" he broke off, throat so tight from embarrassment he couldn't even finish his thought.

Mike chuckled, a light flush creeping up his own naked neck and face. Will squeezed his eyes closed, painfully aware that the witch was not just there, but was nude and fully *man*.

"And I bit you, scratched you halfway to the hells, and brought you rodents. As I said, I wasn't quite myself."

"Are you now? Are you... back? For good?" Will asked, voice soft, eyes still closed.

"Yes, gentle one. I've no intention of leaving now that I've found you."

Will almost broke down then, almost wept at the thought of not being alone any longer. Then, he almost wept from fear.

"The hunters are still here," he whispered, eyes snapping open. "They want to kill you. Or me, I don't know. We have to leave."

Mike's eyes darkened, just a shade, and the smile he wore faded.

"No. I'm not leaving, and I would not drag you from your home.

"Then what? It's the Hunter's Moon. They'll be out, searching. They'll kill you."

*They'll kill both of us. I don't want to die. I don't want to die now, not when I just found you. What about Mama? Are they going to go after her? Are they going to drag her through the street and burn her as witch because of me?*

"No, Rabbit Heart. It's no 'Hunter's Moon.' It's the solstice. I'll not be killed now, not in my own home, the heart of my power. Not when I have you with me."



“Me? What... what am I supposed to do? All I can do is, is toy with plants and herbs. I can shoot a little, but...”

Mike smiled, more fiercely this time.

“You don’t even know half of what you’re capable of, my gentle one. We’re not helpless, and we’re not going to wait for them to descend upon us, or your mother. We’re going to cast them out.”

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Between the two of them, Will should have been thoroughly disgusted. He was coated in dirt and rotting water while Mike was covered head to toe in blood and something thick and gelatinous that Will had no hope of identifying. He would have been embarrassed, well, *more* embarrassed than he already was when he was asked to strip down and bath in the river that ran on the outskirts of the woods if Mike hadn’t seemed so at ease and held his hand.

No one had ever held his hand before, not in the way Mike held it, as if it was something precious, something delicate that needed to be cradled and cared for. Maybe it did, because the scar tissue still felt tender and raw, like if Mike pressed his fingers too hard against it, the spell he’d cast would break and the flesh would simply cave in and collapse, leaving nothing but a raw, open hole again. But the magic held just as Mike held him, and Will remained whole, or as whole as he’d ever been.

He couldn’t keep his eyes up, though he tried. He was too ashamed to be seen, naked and vulnerable in the water that lapped around his waist as the current tugged at his ankles, threatening to sweep him away with it. He was afraid of the water, especially this deep. Everything that brushed against his legs, fish or plant, made him jump and tremble. He knew he had to duck his head beneath the water to wash it, but couldn’t. If he did, he might never come up again.

He jumped when Mike touched his arm, tried to pull away when the hands on his shoulders tightened. It wasn’t a touch meant to hurt, just to steady.

“I’ve got you, Rabbit Heart. You’ll not slip and be swept away.”

So Will let himself be dunked beneath the surface, all the while certain that the hands that held him were sure; they wouldn’t let go. He came back up, for once not gasping in panic, and Mike smiled.

They washed each other of the filth of the world, touched each other’s skin with tentative hands and shy glances, at least on Will’s part. Mike seemed more secure, more sure of himself, and the way he looked at Will was with certainty and such absolute adoration it was almost too much to bear. When the first kiss came, Will wanted to pull away and cover himself. When the second found its place on his lips, Will returned it.

“To the land,” Mike whispered, breath tickling Will’s lashes as he whispered the words.

Will thought he’d be afraid, exposed as he was, where anyone could see: where Mike looked at him without an ounce of shame, but he wasn’t. He lay out, spread across the dirt and dry grass, the water dripping from his hair and skin and soaked into the land. Mike sat astride his waist, not pinning him, but acting as an anchor, the way the clay had. Will felt himself shake from nerves as he raised a hand above his head, following nothing but instinct. He traced his fingers through the ground, as far as he could reach, and Mike completed the circle where Will couldn’t.

“I don’t have any salt,” Will whispered, not sure why he said it or why he’d need salt at all. Mike smiled.

“We’ll consecrate this ground with our own. From our bodies we’ll bless this place, and rid it of evil doers.”

And so they did. With tender touches and searching lips, with canting hips and whispered prayers, they cast their spell, and the world around them paid notice. It listened to the dance between them. Their sweat mingled, dripped from their skin as rain from the sky while their whispers floated up to unify with the songs of the birds above. When they’d each died their little deaths, embraced *la petite mort*, Will felt his power flow deep and far into the ground as Mike’s clawed its way to the sky.

Will had never experienced anything like it. He curled around the burning form of his lover, panting and twitching, more drained than he could have ever conceived. Something gnawed at him, something akin to embarrassment or self consciousness. He was ashamed of the coupling, ashamed of how easily he'd given himself to it, and ashamed of the affirmation to what he'd known to be true about himself for as long as he'd been self aware enough to recognize it. Mike kissed his face, dark eyes heavy as he pressed his hand to Will's naked chest, against his ribs.

"Rabbit Heart, no. No shame, no regret. Banish it from your mind, gentle one. This was no affront to the gods, it was an avowal. Gods don't care what body you inhabit, they care only for the soul, and mine knows yours. No laws of Church or Men rule us here."

Will leaned back, tilted his head so he could see the sun as it began to sink away, finally ending its impossibly long journey. He exhaled, still feeling the ground shifting beneath him, could still feel the rhythmic pulse of life beneath his skin. He wanted to believe Mike, wanted to think that what they'd done hadn't been wrong or foul, but there were still hunters about. He tilted his chin until it was pressed to his chest and looked at Mike who still perched above him. He'd felt the power flow, believed it to be real, but had no idea what they'd actually done other than engage in the desires of the flesh.

"Did it work?" he asked. "Are we safe now? They can't find this place, can they?"

"No. They can't find this place."

"Are they dead?" Will whispered.

"No, sweet one. They'll simply walk out of here and forget it exists. To them it will have been nothing more than a dream."

"What if others come?"

Mike smiled, his dark eyes shining.

"They won't."

"You sound awfully confident," Will said, wiggling against the grass

and craning his neck to look around.

“I am. The protection spell we cast runs miles wide. Can’t you feel it? No man or beast that’s uninvited can cross the circle.”

Will nodded, even though he didn’t have the same confidence Mike had. He’d felt the ley lines, brittle, unfertile, so near death, spring to life beneath their bodies. He’d felt them shift and tremble, a dog as it awakened and stretched after a long sleep. But men were tenacious and hateful. If they wanted to, they would find a way in. He ran his hands across the thick, green grass, and paused. It was soft, much too soft and thick to be the desiccated earth he’d grown up with. He rolled his head to the side and looked at it, pinched a leaf between his fingers, confused.

“What’s this?”

Mike blinked and looked to where Will was still tugging at the plants beneath his hands.

“What do you mean? It looks like clover,” he said with a grin. “I thought you knew your vegetation.”

“It’s growing,” Will said, plucking one and holding it up to examine.

“So it is.”

“Did you do that? When you... came back?”

Mike simply shook his head, the gentle smile still on his face.

“No.”

“Did...” Will licked his lips, feeling foolish for even considering the alternative. “Did *I* do it?”

Mike bent at the waist, caught Will in another kiss, and brushed Will’s still drying hair away from his face so he could see him more clearly.

“You did. My metsaema, my sweet souled leshy, you have no idea the things you can do. I’ve waited an entire lifetime to find you. I can’t

wait to watch you bloom,” Mike whispered, kissing Will’s eyelids so many times Will thought he might go blind from it. “There I shall gaze on the mountains again, on the fields and the woods and the burns in the glen. And away among the corries beyond human ken. In the haunts of the deer I shall roam,” Mike murmured, tracing the line of Will’s jaw.

“In the sweet sounding language of home,” Will agreed, suddenly very tired. Tired, and relieved.

He raised a hand, ran it through Mike’s silky, near black hair, and cradled him close. He sighed, felt a deep rumble from somewhere in Mike’s chest: maybe a hum, or perhaps, a purr. He rolled his eyes up, to the darkening sky, and for the first time, didn’t feel the need to hide indoors or leave offerings to keep the evil spirits away. For the first time in his life, the night of his birth came and he celebrated it under the stars, perfectly safe and content.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

And so my extremely self indulgent little fairy tale comes to a close. I do hope you enjoyed this work as much as I enjoyed writing it. I know it's not in my typical writing style, but I do hope it wasn't disappointing.

As always, comments and kudos are appreciated.

Be well and take care of yourselves.

### **Author's Note:**

This is 100% a self indulgent little AU, mostly because I want to see witchy boys. Ratings and tags will be updated as needed. There will be violence and sexual content in later chapters.

As always, thank you for reading. Comments and kudos are always appreciated. Be well and take care of yourselves.